

GÖREVDE BULUNDUĞU BİR YILIN ARDINDAN CUMHURBAŞKANI RUHANI VE İRAN'IN ‘KADIN MESELESİ’

ÖZ

İslam Cumhuriyeti toplumsal cinsiyet reformuna uyum sağlayabilecek mi? Reformcu Cumhurbaşkanı Hasan Ruhani'nin seçilmesi ülkenin kadınları için ne anlaması geliyor? Görevde bulunduğu bir yılın ardından, Ruhani'nin hükümeti 'kadın meselesi'ne anlamlı bir karşılık verebildi mi? Bu makale, Ruhani yönetiminin devraldığı haliyle İran'da kadının etrafındaki sosyo-politik iklimi ve İran toplumunda kadının yerini incelemekte ve Ruhani'nin kadının statüsündeki gerçek politika değişimini yönetmek için ne kadar yetkin olduğunu analiz etmektedir. Yazar, Ruhani'nin cumhurbaşkanlığındaki bir yılının eleştirel bir değerlendirmesinden hareketle, kadının durumuna ilişkin umut vadeden birtakım değişim belirtilerinin bulunduğu, ancak bunların, kadını ev hanımı ve bakıcı olarak gören ve kadına kamusal alanda sınırlı bir rol atfeden, İran'ın siyasi ve ruhani eliti arasında kökleşmiş olan ataerkil kültüre tamamen karşı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran İslam Cumhuriyeti, Cumhurbaşkanı Ruhani, İran Kadın Hareketi, Ataerkilik, İslam, İslami feminism

**تأثير الأزمة السورية على سياسة الأردن الخارجية : اللاجئون السوريون
والانخراط في الائتلاف القائم تجاه داعش
زينب شاهين منجوتاك
خلاصة :**

تتوّل هذه الدراسة تسليط الضوء على التأثيرات التي تحدثها الحرب الأهلية السورية على هيكلية السياسة الخارجية لدولة الأردن، وبصورة خاصة كيفية تطوير الأردن لسياسات تجاه قضيّة اللاجئين السوريين وتجاه منظمة الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام الارهابية (داعش). إن المنطلق الرئيسي لهذه الدراسة، انه مهما حاولت الأردن البقاء على الحياد في بداية نشوب الحرب الأهلية، فانها وبمرور الزمن بدأت بالتحرّك من منطلق استراتيجي نحو تحويل المخاطر والتهديدات إلى فرص سواء من الناحية الاقتصادية او من زاوية الأمن القومي. ان السياسة الخارجية التقليدية للأردن وامكانياتها لإتخاذ خطوات استراتيجية لعبت دوراً مهماً في تحويل المخاطر المحتملة إلى فرص. وقد استطاعت الأردن، من أجل وقف توسيع حالة عدم الاستقرار والحيلولة دون تحوّل المنطقة إلى الراديكالية، ان تقلّل من تأثير التهديدات الموجة إليها ومن زيادة المعونات الخارجية التي تلقّاها من المجتمع الدولي، وزيادة القروض التي تحصل عليها، وتقوية جيشه، وإرساء أسس شرعية لسلطة نظامه.

**الكلمات الدالة : الأردن، صنع السياسة الخارجية، اللاجئون السوريون، داعش،
المعونات الخارجية.**

PRESIDENT ROUHANI AND IRAN'S 'WOMAN QUESTION' AFTER ONE YEAR IN OFFICE

ABSTRACT

Is the Islamic Republic capable of accommodating gender reform? What does the election of reformist President Hassan Rouhani mean for the country's women? And after one year in office, has his government offered a meaningful response to the 'woman question'? This paper examines the socio-political climate around women and their position in Iranian society inherited by the Rouhani administration, and analyses the extent to which Rouhani has the authority to oversee real policy change on women's status. Through a critical review of Rouhani's first year in office, the author argues that there are some promising signs of change, but these are up against a culture of patriarchy that is entrenched amongst Iran's political and clerical elite, whose view of women is that of the homemaker and caregiver, with limited public agency.

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Keywords: *Islamic Republic of Iran, President Rouhani, The Iranian women's movement, Patriarchy, Islam, Islamic feminism*

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Introduction

Thirty-seven million Iranians – nearly seventy-three percent of the electorate – turned out to vote in the Presidential elections of 14 June 2013. Eighteen million voted for Hassan Rouhani, producing a victory for the ex-diplomat, who had gained support on a policy platform to promote greater cultural openness, reduce government interference in people's lives, and to turn around the country's ailing economy. Women voters were highly visible in the election. What does Rouhani's victory mean for them? Throughout his campaign Rouhani made regular reference to the need to improve the status of women by increasing their social and economic participation. He went so far as to pledge the establishment of an independent ministry for women.¹ Whilst it may be premature to judge whether or not Rouhani's word is resulting in legal and political dividends for women, this paper reviews President Rouhani's first year in office with a view to analysing the extent to which his government has offered a meaningful response to the 'woman question'.

The possibility for Rouhani to make good on his election promises depends largely on the willingness of the regime to accept a more liberal reading of Islamic jurisprudence. And in this respect, Rouhani faces a significant problem: the gender ideology of the Islamic Republic is rooted firmly in a culture of patriarchy, wherein women are subjects of the private sphere with limited public agency. This could hardly be displayed more clearly than in the representation of girls and women in primary and secondary education textbooks in Iran, which portray women cooking, cleaning, and sewing, while men are shown as workers who provide housing, healthcare, and welfare for their wives, children and sisters.² The view that women's ultimate place is within the family, and whose core duties are to attend to familial affairs, is entrenched amongst many conservative clerics in Iran, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and informs conservative interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence on questions relating to women and gender roles. This is a difficult socio-political context in which to promote improvement in women's status, and it may be one of Rouhani's greatest challenges as President.

Is the Islamic State Capable of Gender Reform?

The President of the Islamic Republic is not an all-powerful figure. To be sure, the Constitution accords him great authority, but that is superseded by the founding principle of the Islamic State – *velayat-e faqih*, rule by the most learned Islamic scholar, or expert in classical Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*. That

1 Golnaz Esfandiari, "Perhaps Bowing to Pressure, Rouhani Appoints Women to Iranian Cabinet", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 13 August 2013. <http://www.rferl.org/content/rohani-woman-cabinet-iran/25074111.html>

2 Mehrangiz Kar, "What Rouhani Can and Must do for Iran's Women", *The Brookings Institute*, 2 October 2013. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/iran-at-saban/posts/2013/10/02-womens-rights-rouhani-kar>

position is held by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, who is leader for life, and an Assembly of Experts (also male clerics) is charged with the authority to choose his successors. The Supreme Leader determines the composition of the 12-member Guardian Council, the executive arm of government whose mandate is to ensure all parliamentary legislation remains in line with Islamic law. The Guardian Council consists of six clerics appointed directly by the Supreme Leader, and six jurists appointed by the Supreme Judge, who is an appointee of the Supreme Leader. The conundrum is clear. There is little room for diversity of viewpoints in the power structure of the Islamic State. The merging of political and religious authority places reform-minded politicians in tight constraints so far as their ability to question policies or laws deemed discriminatory.

Iranian women have carried the consequences. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic does not provide a basis for equality between men and women, and local advocates of women's rights have critiqued the document for its narrow construction of women as child-bearers and care-givers, whose places in society are defined by their relationships to men.³ And yet, remarkably, there is a sense of hope and optimism for change from within the women's movement. According to Iranian scholar Ali Akbar Mahdi, the Iranian women's movement is:

...Patient in strategy, and flexible in tactics. These are very important [factors] because Iranian society has witnessed [a number of] political waves in the past three decades and activists have learned how and when to engage or disengage with the state to their own advantage.⁴

And just a few months after Rouhani's election in June 2013, lawyer Maeedeh Shahshahani, had this to say:

Law reform in Iran is difficult because regulations must be compatible with Sharia...The only way is to convince the Ayatollahs, who are experts in Sharia, to find new interpretations of some Sharia rules. Rouhani is a religious man so of course he does not want to change the regime...But that's OK. We are young and we hope that he can make some changes. Nobody in Iran can make big changes. But I think Rouhani can do something good.⁵

The possibility that Rouhani can indeed 'do something good' is real, and there is precedence to draw on in this respect. The last time the Islamic Re-

³ *The Impact of Laws on Women's Lives*. 2006, (The information pamphlet of Iran's the One Million Signatures Campaign), Translated by Arash Nazari in Tehran, Iran, July 2007.

⁴ Azadeh Davachi, "Interview with Professor Ali Akbar Mahdi", *Feminist School*, 11 June 2011. <http://www.feministschool.com/english/spip.php?article458>

⁵ Maedeh Shahshahani, Personal communication with the author, 3 October 2013.

public was faced with prospects for progressive change was under the leadership of reformist President Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005). Khatami was elected on a platform of individual freedoms and a democratic, pluralistic Islam. During his first term as President, Iran was characterised by a burgeoning civil society. There was an explosion of independent newspapers and an unprecedented wave of open debate and free expression. Khatami called on the state to accommodate the needs and freedoms of its constituency, without necessarily engaging in systematic overhaul. Incremental reform was the name of the game.

In 2000 and 2005 Iran submitted detailed reports to the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) as part of the United Nations' Appraisal of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The reports outline a range of initiatives designed to improve women's status in the public sphere under Khatami's presidency. These included the establishment in 1997 of the Centre for Women's Participation, directed by Presidential Advisor, Zahra Shojaei. One of the key tasks of the Centre was to undertake a review of the Civil Code of Iran to identify discrimination against women and propose legal reforms. Another major achievement for women was the inclusion of gender studies as a subject in most universities.⁶ Centres for the dissemination of legal information for women in Tehran, Mazadarán, Khorasan, Fars, and Esfahan, and seminars to foster women's legal awareness were held regularly throughout the country. The climate of reform also allowed for a number of short film festivals to support women filmmakers and celebrate their work documenting the stories of everyday Iranian women, their difficulties, and their triumphs.⁷

In a report to Freedom House Iranian feminist Nayereh Tohidi pointed out that women's participation in non-governmental organisations increased dramatically during Khatami's presidency, and served as a conduit through which women could influence their local communities. According to Tohidi 'in 1997 there were only 67 NGOs devoted to women's and children's rights; by 2005, encouraged by the Khatami administration, this number had reached 480'.⁸ Women were engaged in cooperatives, study groups, and cultural centres around issues focused on issues such as health and population, women's rights, development, disability, youth, environmental protection, human rights, minority rights, and sustainable development.

6 "Overview of Trends in Achieving Gender Equality and the Advancement of Women", *Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 2000. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/responses/Iran.pdf>

7 "The Answer of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Questionnaire to Governments on Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly (2000)", *Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 2005. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/IRAN-English.pdf>

8 Nayereh Tohidi, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Iran*, (New York, NY: Freedom House, 2010), p. 29. http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/Iran.pdf

In 2000, thirteen women were elected as members of the Sixth *Majlis* (parliament) forming a reformist bloc that came to be known as the Women's Faction. According to one of its members, Elaheh Koolaee, the Women's Faction challenged the conservative gender ideology of the regime 'from within the Islamic framework by relying on the progressive teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini.'⁹ This technique, widely referred to as Islamic feminism, attempts to establish a basis for women's rights in Islam's holy texts.¹⁰ It involves mining revelatory sources for evidence that God and the Prophet Muhammad intended women as equal partners in the Muslim community. Islamic feminists engage in historical grounding and contextualisation to delimit the intent and applicability of some verses to a particular time, place, and circumstance. The approach is underscored by the Islamic tradition *ijtihad*: intellectual interpretation and innovation of Islam's holy sources. *Ijtihad* involves the application of human reason to *Sharia* precepts to ascertain the applicability of particular injunctions in modern situations.

Islamic feminism makes a vibrant contribution to the tradition of intellectual reformism in Iran. Although gender-enlightened precepts are not lacking in Islamic texts, they have been marginalised for centuries by conservative clerics keen to maintain patriarchal norms. Islamic feminists seek to reclaim and proclaim their own interpretations of the faith. With this as their starting point, Islamic feminists consider the framework of the Islamic Republic as capable of accommodating calls for change in women's status. In many ways, this represents a pragmatic approach to change in Iran. There is no distinction between religious and State authority in the governing structure of the Islamic Republic; a challenge to the regime is thus perceived and publicised at the official level as a challenge to the word of God. Therefore, the strategic value of Islamic feminism lies in its restraint from overtly questioning the organising principles of the Islamic state. Islamic feminists confine their activism to those aspects of state policy deemed to deviate from Islam and the original emancipatory ideals of the revolution.

The strategy met with some success for the Women's Faction, who managed to convince the establishment to allow single women to travel abroad

9 Elaheh Koolaee, "The Prospects for Democracy: Women Reformists in the Iranian Parliament" in Fereshteh Nourae-Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era*, (The Feminist Press at the City University of New York: New York, 2005), p. 205.

10 See for example: Haleh Afshar, "Islam and Feminism: An Analysis of Political Strategies", in Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam, Legal and Literary Perspectives*, (Garnet Publishing Limited: Berkshire, United Kingdom, 1996), pp. 197–216. And, Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: 'Years of Hardship, Years of Growth'" in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L Espósito (eds.), *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 1998), pp. 59–84. And, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Islam, Women and Civil Rights: The Religious Debate in the Iran of the 1990s", in Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (eds.), *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran*, (Curzon Press: Surrey, Great Britain, 2002), pp. 169–88.

to study.¹¹ Their lobbying also contributed to an amendment of the custody law to allow women automatic custody of children under seven years of age.¹² The Women's Faction was also successful in raising the minimum legal age for girls to marry from nine to thirteen years of age.¹³

But the Women's Faction wanted to go much further than distinct changes to individual laws. In 2003, they successfully lobbied for the Convention on the Elimination on all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to be brought before parliament as a new basis on which to establish laws on women's status in Iran. According to UN Women, CEDAW – often referred to as a bill of rights for women – 'provides the basis for realising equality between men and women through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life...The Convention is the only human rights treaty which...targets culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations'. So drawing the Convention into the national debate on women's status was a huge step for the Islamic government to take. In the early stages of debate, the CEDAW case looked set for success, as the reformist-dominated Parliament voted in favour of ratification. However, the debate was brought to a halt when the Guardian Council rejected the proposal on the basis that it was both 'un-Iranian' and 'un-Islamic'.¹⁴ The Guardian Council defended its position by invoking the cornerstone of the Islamic Republic's gender ideology – gender parity or a 'balance' of rights, wherein women's primary place is in the home, as opposed to gender equality in both public and family life.¹⁵

This was a sign of things to come. Over the course of Khatami's Presidency, the regime's tolerance for the reform movement grew thin. Whilst the above achievements of the Women's Faction do represent the State's capacity to accommodate change, in reality the Guardian Council rejected outright the majority of bills proposed by the Women's Faction, and those that were passed were first 'carefully emptied of their progressive content'.¹⁶ This was a source of great frustration for the Women's Faction, and posed a major prob-

11 Mehrangiz Kar, "Women and Civil Society in Iran" in Fereshteh Nouraei-Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era*, (The Feminist Press at the City University of New York: New York, 2005), p. 225.

12 Elaheh Koolaei, "The Prospects for Democracy: Women Reformists in the Iranian Parliament", p. 210.

13 Mahmood Monshipouri, "The Road to Globalization Runs through Women's Struggle", *World Affairs*, Vol. 167, No. 1, 2004, p. 5.

14 Ali Akbar Dareini, "Iran Parliament Provokes Opposition", *Worldwide Religious News*, 4 August 2003. <http://wwrn.org/articles/6554/?&place=iran§ion=church-state>

15 Mahsa Shekarloo, "Iranian Women Take on the Constitution", *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*, 21 July 2005. <http://www.wluml.org/node/2370>

16 Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Fatemeh Haqiqatjoo and the Sixth Majlis, a Woman in Her Own Right", *Middle East Report Online*, Vol. 34, 2004. <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer233/fatemeh-haqiqatjoo-sixth-majles>

lem for the viability of their methods, since they were always very careful to argue how proposed changes to women's status were in line with the essence of Islam.

In the Presidential elections of 2005 the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei, banned all reformist clerics from running. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office, ushering in a period of social and political conservatism (2005-2013). The rise and fall of the State's experiment with reform caused significant disenchantment within the women's movement over the reliance on parliamentary process and legislative change to improve women's position in society. In fact, one of the most outspoken members of the Women's Faction, Fatemah Haqiqatjoo, announced her resignation from parliament in 2004, before the end of her tenure. In her resignation speech Haqiqatjoo referred to the oath that all parliamentarians must take when sworn into the Majlis, which requires members to 'defend the independence and the interests of the country, and to serve the people'. Haqiqatjoo stated that 'since the possibility of me keeping my oath has been taken from me and I have been deprived of the ability to defend your legal rights, it is no longer a source of pride for me to stay in this house.'¹⁷

The Women's Faction had relied on the Islamic feminist belief that it is precisely the Islamic character of the Iranian state that allows the 'woman question' to come to the fore in Iranian politics. According to this analysis, the thorough Islamisation of Iranian society in the early 1980s made the language of Islam accessible to all.¹⁸ Now, women could claim rights and representation using the same language as the politically powerful, which, by default, placed pressure on the state to recognise their position as legitimate and just. By relying on sources endogenous to the Islamic tradition, Islamic feminists were provided room for movement inside the boundaries of state acceptability, while at the same time challenging conservative interpretations of women's status in Islam.

In reality, and as demonstrated by the experience of the Women's Faction, that has not been the case. In the interests of maintaining a culture of patriarchy according men a privileged position in public life, the Islamic government is careful and strategic in selecting which religious arguments to accept as legitimate for the 'Muslim woman', and which to dismiss. Lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi, perhaps Iran's most well-known women's rights advocate, eloquently describes the problems with employing a theological basis for meaningful and sustained progressive change:

Ijtihad frees us by removing the burden of definitiveness – we can interpret and reinterpret Quranic teachings forever; but it also means...

17 Ibid.

18 Haleh Afshar, "Islam and Feminism: An Analysis of Political Strategies".

it is possible for everyone, always, to have a point. It means that patriarchal men and powerful authoritarian regimes who repress in the name of Islam can exploit *ijtihad* to interpret Islam in the regressive, unforgiving manner that suits their sensibilities and political agendas... This does not mean that Islam and equal rights for men and women are incompatible; it means that invoking Islam in a theocracy refracts the religion through a kaleidoscope, with interpretations perpetually shifting and mingling and the vantage of the most powerful prevailing.¹⁹

Echoing Haqiqatjoo's sentiments and disillusionment with advocating for change within the formal walls of government, the women's movement at large took its effort to the streets. At a public protest for change in women's status on 12 June 2006, the protestors reportedly 'made a conscious effort to avoid any engagement...with religious arguments.'²⁰ In the same year a broad-based campaign gathered momentum on the Iranian landscape: the One Million Signatures Campaign, a signature drive petitioning the State to bring an end to all discriminatory laws against women. The first official campaign statement, posted on the *Change for Equality* website on 27 June 2006, read: 'The true path to equality will not be paved through the existing power structure or a dialogue solely with men and women in positions of power'. Rather, street politics were preferred, with activists going door-to-door, talking face-to-face with everyday Iranians about women's issues in cafes, parks, schools, and at sporting events and social gatherings.

This trajectory speaks to one of the core intellectual debates within the Iranian women's movement: reform, or reconstruction? That is, can the meaningful establishment and protection of women's rights in Iran occur within the existing State framework via woman-centred re-readings of Islamic sources? Alternatively, will this necessitate the use of secular human rights discourse (and on the far end of that spectrum, the separation of religion and state)? Given the various promises and constraints of the Islamic feminist method, exactly how Iranian women's rights advocates will go about promoting progressive change under the Rouhani government remains open. Will they focus on grassroots activism, or attempt to gain a foothold in a reformist-dominated government? To a large extent, that depends on the degree to which Rouhani will earnestly open up new lines of formal dialogue with women within the government, and the extent to which he will accept – but more importantly advocate and promote to those higher in power – a more liberal, gender-enlightened reading of Islamic sources.

19 Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening, a Memoir of Revolution and Hope*, (New York: Random House, 2006), pp. 191-192.

20 Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Iranian Women Protestors Strategize Against Violent Repression", *Peacework Magazine*, Issue 367, July-August 2006. <http://www.peaceworkmagazine.org/iranian-women-protesters-strategize-against-violent-repression>

The experience of the reform movement of the 1990s showed that the Islamic Republic is indeed capable of accommodating change in women's policy. However, those changes were severely restricted by the Guardian Council, which used its veto power to ensure a conservative understanding of women's place in Islam trumped the more liberal alternative view put forward by members of Women's Faction and the reform movement at large. The danger for the new regime, according to Iranian human rights lawyer Mehrangiz Kar, is that President Rouhani could cite the experience of the Khatami administration 'as an excuse to claim that he lacks the legal power to boldly tackle some of Iran's most pressing problems', most notably the issue of women.²¹

Rouhani's Inheritance

Rouhani, therefore, has inherited a vexed legacy when it comes to the status of women, who represent over half his constituents. The anti-reformist backlash that ensued under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad saw what few positive changes that came out of the reform era hampered, and in some cases reversed. One of Ahmadinejad's first steps as president was to change the Centre for Women's Participation to the Centre for Women and Family Affairs, confirming his government's view on women's rightful place within the private sphere. The growth of the nongovernmental sector also slowed significantly under Ahmadinejad's presidency, and existing groups faced intensified intimidation and harassment.²² Many prominent women were jailed for speaking out on women's rights during this time, including lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, activists Bahareh Hedayat, Maryam Shafiepour, and Zhila Karamzadeh-Makvandi, and journalists Zhila Bani Ya'ghoub, Shiva Nazar Ahari, and Mahsa Amrabadi.

In a move that stifled women's voices in the public realm even further, in January 2008 the popular Islamic feminist magazine, *Zanan*, was shut down after ten years in publication for 'endangering the spiritual, mental, and intellectual health of its readers, and threatening psychological security by deliberately offering a dark picture of the Islamic Republic'.²³ That 'dark picture' was, quite simply, derived from *Zanan*'s willingness to question the gender ideology of the regime in articles such as *Why Don't Women get Paid as Much as Men?*, and, *Man: Partner, or Boss?*. Edited by women's rights advocate, Shahla Sherkat, *Zanan* engaged in radical reinterpretations of Islamic sources to present a woman-centred understanding of women's rights in Islam. Sherkat and her team promoted the right and capacity of Iranian women to engage with Islamic sources without having to rely on Islamic jurists to derive the

21 Mehrangiz Kar, "What Rouhani Can and Must do for Iran's Women".

22 Nayereh Tohidi, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Iran*, p. 29.

23 Nina Ansary, "Iranian Women's Magazine Zanan Makes Comeback", *Women's E-News*, 28 May 2014. <http://womensenews.org/story/media-stories/140528/iranian-womens-magazine-zanan-makes-comeback#.U7T-J6hCVdO>

meaning of their faith. In this way, writers for *Zanan* challenged the culture of patriarchy underpinning the State's gender ideology, making them an obvious target for censorship.

When the Green Movement uprising engulfed the streets of Iran to protest the reinstatement of Ahmadinejad, the State's reaction was harsh and unforgiving. Security forces were deployed to break up the protests, and a number of civilians died in the violence that ensued. Most prominent amongst these was 26-year-old student Neda Agha-Soltan, who was shot in the chest after being caught in the middle of a street protest. Reports circulated that Agha-Soltan was shot by a sniper, and reformist-politician, Mehdi Karroubi, publicly insinuated that this was the work of the *Basij* Militia – the paramilitary wing of the State's security forces. On his website, Karroubi stated: 'A young girl, who did not have a weapon in her soft hands, or a grenade in her pocket, became a victim of thugs who are supported by a horrifying security apparatus.'²⁴ Subsequently, Agha-Soltan became something of the poster-child for the Green Movement and the reform movement more broadly.

Following the uprising, authorities closed the Tehran-based Human Rights Defenders Centre, an NGO co-founded by 2003 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Shirin Ebadi, who had won the award for her work in defending the rights of women and children against the State. Ebadi's Nobel medal was confiscated by authorities, and Iran's Revolutionary Court froze her bank account and ordered her to pay \$410,000 in taxes it said was owed on the \$1.3 million prize money. Ebadi was barred from returning to Iran after attending a conference abroad just prior to the June 2009 election. Although the women's movement boasts decentralised leadership, Ebadi was a strong and dominant figure in the women's movement. She regularly spoke out public on matters of discrimination against women and was a founding member of the One Million Signatures Campaign. The State's efforts, and ultimate success, in removing her from the Iranian landscape seemed like another measure to silence public discourse on women and their rights.

Another blow to the same effect came in late-2012, when the government introduced new legislation to close a range of university courses to women applicants, despite the fact that around sixty-three percent of student enrolments in Iran are female. Women were prohibited from fourteen fields of higher education and severely restricted from admission to 241 additional fields. In a submission to the United Nations Working Group on Discrimination Against Women in Law and Practice, the London-based non-governmental organisation *Justice for Iran* reported that:

²⁴ Nazila Fathi, "In a Death Seen Around the World, a Symbol of Iranian Protests", *The New York Times*, 22 June 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/world/middleeast/23neda.html?_r=0

[Data] from 22,800 courses offered during the current academic year [2012-2013] at Iranian public universities indicates there are no women admitted into the following fields of study: petroleum engineering (reservoir evaluation or drilling), railway engineering, data management, communication, emergency medical technology, veterinary technician, mechanical engineering (water, gas and installations), electrical engineering (power), physical education and sports (coaching), law, political sciences (security studies), policing, social sciences (security studies), and religious studies. Gender-based university admission policies entirely impede women's participation in these fields. For instance, out of 1360 spaces available for new entrants into the field of emergency medical technology, none have been allocated to women.²⁵

Whilst the Islamic government gave no official reason for the motivation behind the legislation, Ebadi claimed it was a government attempt to exclude women from education 'to stop them being active in society and return them to the home.'²⁶

This claim is supported to an extent by official unemployment statistics. On 14 April 2014 the *Tehran Times* covered an announcement from the Statistical Centre of Iran that in the calendar year from 21 March 2013 to 20 March 2014, women were unemployed at a rate of 19.8 percent, more than double that of men at 8.6 percent. Female youth (those aged between 15-24 years) were unemployed at a rate of 40.8 percent, again doubling that of men who were unemployed at a rate of 20 percent.

Rouhani's First Year in Office: Signs of Progress and Stagnation

So when Rouhani took office on 4 August 2013, he was faced with a legacy of serious policy restrictions on women's participation in the public realm. This was a problem and a major challenge, since one of Rouhani's main election promises was to increase women's participation in economic and public life. Yet rather than use his inauguration day to boost women's public presence, Rouhani disappointed thousands of women voters when he announced an all-male list. Even former-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who sat much further to the political right than his successor, had nominated three women for his second cabinet. One of those nominations, Marzieh Vahid Dastjerdi, was approved by the Guardian Council and appointed as the Minister for Health and Head of the Centre for Women and Family Affairs in 2009. In response to Rouhani's cabinet announcement, Iranian feminist and activist Susan Tahmasebi, who played a key role in the early years of the One Million

25 "Absence of Women from Iranian Universities", *Justice for Iran*, 6 December 2012. <http://justice4iran.org/english/reports/10059/>

26 Fariba Sahraei, "Iranian university bans on women causes consternation", BBC News, 22 September 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19665615>

Signatures Campaign (but is now based in Washington) said: ‘We expected more from Rouhani, especially [since] he came in promising to have a positive view on women’s issues.’²⁷

In a press conference, which aired on the *Islamic Republic of Iran News Network* on 6 August, Rouhani defended his position:

I promised to provide gender equality to enhance women’s participation in social activities...[but] women would not have been satisfied if I had appointed a female minister. It is an illusion that if we have one woman minister, then we will achieve gender equality in society. Of course, all the inequalities towards women must be compensated. I will tell my cabinet to utilise women’s knowledge in different levels of management. The aim is not to have a woman in the government just to say ‘Look, we have a woman, so they got their rights’.

Tahmasebi agreed that the women’s movement was not interested in tokenism, but argued that Rouhani could have sent a strong message the value of women’s place in place life by including them in his ministry: ‘It would show that he recognises that half of the population is [made up of] women; that a lot of people who voted for him are women; that he wants to have a cabinet and a group of ministers that are somewhat representative of the general population of Iran.’²⁸

Rouhani followed the announcement of his Cabinet by appointing three women deputies out of a possible eleven. Elham Aminzadeh, a former-lawyer and university professor, was appointed to the office as Vice-President for Legal Affairs; Masoumeh Ebtekar was re-appointed to her posts as Vice-President and Head of the Environmental Organisation (Ebtekar held these posts under both Khatami and Ahmadinejad’s offices); and Shahindokht Molaverdi was appointed as Vice-President for Women and Family Affairs. In addition, Marzieh Afkham was appointed as the Spokesperson for the Foreign Minister, and a number of women were appointed as Governors in various provinces throughout Iran, including Rigi Homayra, governor of Sistan-Baluchestan province; Masoumeh Parandvar, governor of Hamoun; Marjan Nazqelichi, governor of Torkaman in Golestan province; and Maryam Shadivand, governor of Darreh-Shahr in Ilam.

On 6 May 2014 the *Islamic Republic News Agency* reported on the appointments as representing direct action from Rouhani to fulfill his promises to increase women’s economic and social participation. It is noteworthy, however, that there has been virtually no public discourse on the establishment of the independent ministry for women – one of Rouhani’s major election promises

27 Golnaz Esfandiari, “Perhaps Bowing to Pressure, Rouhani Appoints Women to Iranian Cabinet”.

28 Golnaz Esfandiari, “Perhaps Bowing to Pressure, Rouhani Appoints Women to Iranian Cabinet”.

– and no suggestion that under Rouhani's leadership the Centre for Women and Family Affairs should or might revert back to its original name and purpose, the Centre for Women's Participation.

Yet the appointment of Molaverdi as Vice-President for Women and Family Affairs does offer a real chance for change. Molaverdi has been well-known for cooperating and working with women's rights activists in Iran for many years. She was quick to publicly question Rouhani's all-male cabinet, asking 'why do men still not trust expert women?'²⁹ She was also openly critical of several policies introduced on women's status by the former Ahmadinejad regime. She decried, for example, the introduction of gender quotas in higher education, and criticised the Office for Women and Family Affairs for over-emphasising women's role in the private sphere, arguing the Office should also 'pay attention to women entrepreneurs, experts, and women's education'.³⁰ She also spoke out against a 2012 bill to reduce the number of hours pregnant women were allowed to work, arguing:

Reducing working hours for women may gradually threaten women's participation at the work place...We have better suggestion, namely offering flexible working hours for women...and involving men and boys more in household chores. In fact, household chores must be divided equally between family members when women work outside [the home]. Men and boys must consider this fact: they are no longer the only breadwinners.³¹

One of Molaverdi's first acts as Vice-President for Women and Family Affairs was to appoint a religious scholar to work on the question of how to incorporate more progressive interpretations of the Sharia into Iranian law. According to Tahmasebi, Molaverdi 'has also promised to re-examine, and attempt to revoke, discriminatory legislation introduced during Ahmadinejad's two presidential terms, but it is unclear whether she will have the support within the Rouhani administration, the parliament and the Guardian Council to make substantial changes'.³²

29 "Political Murmuring Around a Non-political Vice President: Who is supporting the most important woman in the cabinet?" *FarsNews Agency*, 19 October 2013. Translated by Fatemah Nejati. <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920727000734>

30 "The Third Woman Entered the Cabinet: Shahindokht Molaverdi, Rouhani's Vice-President for Women's Affairs", *Khabar Online*, 8 October 2013. Translated by Fatemah Nejati. <http://khabaronline.ir/detail/316731/society/4422> accessed 07.06.2014

31 "Molaverdi: Being a Member of Facebook is Not a Crime" *Tabnak News*, 17 March 2014. Translated by Fatemah Nejati. <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/387362>

32 Sussan Tahmasebi, "Rouhani and Women's Rights in Iran: Evidence of Continuity and Change", *Association for Women's Rights in Development*, 4 November 2014. <http://www.awid.org/Library/Rouhani-And-Women-s-Rights-In-Iran-Evidence-Of-Continuity-And-Change>

At the very least, the appointment of Molaverdi is a sign of goodwill from the Rouhani government; a signal that the intention of his government is to move in the direction of reform of women's status to promote their place in the public sphere. Indeed, in a speech on 20 April 2014 – National Women's Day in Iran, held annually to commemorate the birthday of Hazrat Fatimah, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad – Rouhani criticised 'those who consider women's presence in society as a threat'.³³ And on 29 May, after being banned from publication for six years, *Zanan* magazine was re-launched as *Zanan-e Emrooz* ['Women of Today']. In the magazine's second life, *Zanan-e Emrooz* has already published articles that question the confinement of women's place to the private sphere, including on controversial topics such as women's exclusion from sporting arenas, the reporting of women's voices in parliament, and the incidence of domestic violence against women.³⁴

These are positive signs for the future of women's status in Iran and should not be dismissed. And yet, the underlying culture of patriarchy is powerful and continues to be advocated by those with much greater power than the President. Rouhani's position on women's status, in fact, appears to contrast sharply with those of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. The Supreme Council of the Revolution, a body headed by the Supreme Leader, for example, has insisted on the maintenance of traditional gender roles wherein women are homemakers and men are breadwinners and providers. In Kar's analysis, 'as a result of this presumption, the important topic of collaboration of men and women in domestic matters, and on a broader scale in social matters, has been completely omitted from government plans'.³⁵

In his 2014 National Women's Day speech, Khamenei commented that gender equality was 'one of the biggest mistakes of Western thought. Justice is a right,' he said, 'but equality is sometimes right, and sometimes wrong.' He added that whilst he did not oppose women's employment in the public sphere, it should not conflict with the 'main issue', that is women's role in the 'family environment and household'.³⁶

Just a few weeks later, Khamenei issued a public call to encourage Iranian women to augment the nation's birthrate – his policy response to a falling birth rate and concerns for the country's economy. He went so far as to criticize the widely lauded family planning programs implemented by the Iranian government in the 1980s, which won several awards from the United Nations Population Fund.³⁷ This was not just an empty statement. Khamenei's posi-

33 "Progress Impossible without Contribution of Women: Rouhani", *Tehran Times*, 20 April 2014. <http://www.tehrantimes.com/politics/115232-progress-impossible-without-contribution-of-women-rouhani>

34 Nina Ansary, "Iranian Women's Magazine *Zanan* Makes Comeback".

35 Mehrangiz Kar, "What Rouhani Can and Must do for Iran's Women".

36 "Progress Impossible without Contribution of Women: Rouhani".

37 "Supreme Leader Encourages Young Generation to Augment Birth Rate", *Islamic Republic News Agency*.

tion is backed by the Comprehensive Population and Sanctity of the Family Plan, a bill first introduced to parliament by the Ahmadinejad government, and still under consideration. The proposed legislation provides incentives for families who choose to have more children and, according to Tahmasebi, 'gradually institutes the employment of married only people into the education system'. 'If the bill is passed', says Tahmasebi, 'it will be a major setback for women.'³⁸

Conclusion

In his election campaign of June 2013 Rouhani promised to improve the status of women by increasing their social and economic participation. It is still early days in Rouhani's Presidency, and only careful observation over the next four years will reveal the true extent of his commitments. There are already some signs of goodwill, albeit very little concrete progress. Although the presence of women in his government is not as significant as many women's rights advocates had hoped, the appointment of several vice-presidents and governors may go some way in making women's voices heard in the public arena, as will the re-licensing of the popular feminist magazine, *Zanan-e Emrooz*. And the appointment of Shahindokht Molaverdi as Vice-President for Women and Family Affairs is of great significance. On several occasions, Molaverdi has publicly and forcefully spoken out against the view that women's rightful place is within the walls of domesticity. Following in the footsteps of Islamic feminists before her, and in spirit of *ijtihad*, she has appointed a religious scholar to work on the question of how to incorporate more progressive interpretations of the *Sharia* into Iranian law.

But the power of Rouhani and his team is seriously limited by the stipulations of the Iranian Constitution, which accords the 'final say' on all legal matters to the Supreme Leader and the clerical elite. Ayatollah Khamenei's position on women contrasts sharply with that of Rouhani and the reformist vision at large. The Supreme Leader has advocated a patriarchal view of women as homemakers who rely on men for sustenance and support. Khamenei's position is grounded in a political framework that is informed by a complex mix of culture, tradition and religion; one that sees women as subjects of the private sphere. This is an entrenched view amongst many political conservatives in Iran, including those who make up the executive arm of government and are charged with the power to vet all proposals for legislative reform. The patriarchal view of gender roles amongst those with great power in Iran has manifested itself in a number of policies, such as gender quotas in universities and the closure of several courses to women applicants, and the push for

cy, 5 May 2014. http://www.irna.ir/en/News/2684574/Politic/Supreme_Leader_encourages_young_generation_to_augment_birth_rate

38 Sussan Tahmasebi, "Rouhani and Women's Rights in Iran: Evidence of Continuity and Change".

women to attend to their primary job of ‘having babies for the nation’. In addition, official unemployment statistics show that women are unemployed at around double the rate of men, despite representing around sixty-three percent of university students.

The possibility for Rouhani to make good on his election promises to women depends largely on the willingness of the regime to accept a more liberal reading of Islamic jurisprudence. The state has shown some signs of accommodation in the past, and Rouhani’s team can build on that precedence. For the most part, however, in the interests of maintaining men’s privileged position in public life, the Islamic government has been very careful in selecting which religious arguments to accept as legitimate for the ‘Muslim woman’, and which to dismiss. This will be one of Rouhani’s greatest challenges as he attempts to boost women’s status in the public arena.

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