

At the Crossroads of Tradition and Modernity: Personal Reflections

Mahnaz Afkhami

I have spent most of my adult life defending and promoting women's human rights. I came to this field through English literature, largely innocent of theories of feminism. By the time I encountered these theories formally in the 1970s as secretary general of the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI), I had already experienced their essence in my contacts and conversations with my students from the English Literature classes at the National University of Iran. A good novel poses abiding issues one can appropriate and contextualize—issues of individual space, of burden of choice, of the tension between authority and freedom.

I found my students very interested in exploring these questions in the context of their own lives. They lived in a culture that was changing, a culture that was torn between tradition and modernity. My students experienced it in the form of a tension between their wish to make their own decisions about their lives and their equally powerful commitment to make their parents and community happy and proud. Was it possible to accomplish both under the prevailing circumstances? Could a woman in Iran be a good Muslim and at the same time live a modern life? How would a woman acquire identity? Did she have "honor" in her own right, or was her honor inextricably bound to that of her menfolk? Is enjoying Western music betraying tradition? Does a brother have the right to punish his sister for seeing and talking with a boy? Why are the norms the

Mahnaz Afkhami is founder and president of Women's Learning Partnership and executive director of the Foundation for Iranian Studies. She was formerly minister of state for women's affairs in Iran. Her numerous publications have been widely translated and distributed internationally.

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way they are? Who has defined the rules? Does changing patriarchy offend the divine order? Is it possible to imagine women marrying many men instead of men marrying many women? Does a woman have the moral right to rebel? Does she have the courage to rebel? Is it more honorable to rebel or to toe the line?

This kind of dialogue, which began in the classroom in 1968—a year after I had finished my studies in the United States and returned to Iran—and continued in and out of the classroom thereafter, led to the establishment of the Association of Iranian University Women, which I, with the support of colleagues and students, founded in 1969. We became affiliated with WOI in 1970 as part of a network of fifty-five autonomous organizations. Subsequently, in 1971, I became secretary general of WOI, a position I held until the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

At WOI, I learned that the questions my students raised and the issues that occupied the attention of a majority of ordinary women in Iran's towns and villages were different only in style and expression. Rural illiterate women used different words to voice their problems and aspirations but meant the same thing. They too wanted freedom and equality. They wanted to be recognized for the work they did at home and in the field; to have control over their lives and the life of their children; to feel secure knowing that they would not be divorced simply because their husband had uttered the word; to be sure that their husband would not bring home another wife or concubine. They wanted for their daughters an education that would help them have a better life than theirs. They wondered how what they wanted might be reconciled with what their religion demanded and their environment enforced.

During my tenure at WOI, I learned that rights are closely related to discourse. Iran had undergone a phenomenal constitutional revolution at the turn of the century. The new constitution was founded on modern ideas of limited government and popular sovereignty. Women had participated in the revolution for freedom, though largely unaware of its significance for their rights. The constitutional movement was concerned with modernity and rights, though, and women had a stake in both. The next seventy years witnessed a gradual increase in women's awareness and an evolving effort to achieve the will and the skill to become a part of modern society. By 1970, women had become more educated, more aware, and better organized. They had gained the right to vote. Already several women had been elected to the two houses of

parliament and a woman had become a cabinet minister. Significant changes had been introduced in the family law, which in Muslim societies remains the most fortified bastion of male supremacy. The language, however, was still patriarchal. In the dominant discourse, women still became better educated in order to be better mothers and raise better children for the future of the country. Men and women were two halves of a single entity, each incomplete in itself, but each made to perform a different set of tasks that would complete the other. Women had to be allowed to enter the economy because development required everyone's participation, but men, it was maintained, were built to provide and to protect.

Discourse is a matter of habit fortified by cultural structures. Sometimes a society objectively transcends the conditions that produced the discourse, but habitually defers to the past and subjectively employs its language. Such a society is never at ease. In Iran, women's legal, social, and political conditions had changed drastically during the 1960s. Yet, at the beginning of the 1970s, the discourse was still patriarchal.

I learned to see my task as working to change the context of the debate on gender and thereby to change the patriarchal discourse. As in many other important events in one's life, this also unfolded half-consciously. My colleagues and I had worked hard for several months to organize a 10,000 member National Congress of Iranian Women elected mostly from small town and rural areas across the country. Once the formalities were over, a member of the Council went to the podium. She expounded on the theme of the complementarity of the roles of men and women: "A woman is like half an apple and the man the other. Neither is complete in itself." When my turn came, I said, with some trepidation, that as women we are not half of anything; we are whole human beings, complete in ourselves and dependent on no one but ourselves. Much to my surprise, the Congress rose to its feet, clapping and shouting approval. I knew then that we had crossed an important threshold.

Shortly thereafter, in 1975, Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda asked me to join his cabinet as minister of state for women's affairs. Conscious that joining the government might adversely affect my role as a spokesperson for women, I hesitated. The position

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was new and untried, not only in Iran, but also in other countries. The exception was France where Françoise Giroud, who held the exact position that was now offered to me in Iran, had achieved encouraging results. My colleagues and I decided that I should accept, hoping that the grassroots support I enjoyed as WOI secretary general combined with the access and authority offered by the cabinet position would create a synergy we could use to further the cause of women's rights.

During the next few years before the Islamic Revolution, we achieved several pivotal goals. We passed a second family protection law that, among its provisions, raised the marriage age of women to eighteen and of men to twenty-one, gave women the right to divorce and custody of their children in case of the father's death, and nearly eliminated polygamy. Other laws provided for childcare in the work place, full-time benefits for half-time work for mothers of children up to the age of three, and equal pay for equal work. By 1978, we convinced the cabinet to resolve that all governmental economic, social, and cultural decisions requiring cabinet approval had to be cleared for gender impact.

These were phenomenal accomplishments in a Muslim society. Several circumstances made them possible. First, despite the laws on the books and the dominant patriarchal discourse, women and a significant number of men had transcended the traditional mindset. Second, the modernizing government was a great help to women's aspirations. Even though most men in the government did not favor women's causes, the government believed in the urgency of modernization and development. We therefore presented women's rights and interests as primary requirements for modernizing the society and state. In due course, men who made the major decisions also began to view women—though not necessarily women's human rights—as an inextricable component of development and modernization. Third, women learned to bring together two sets of inputs—one set from the grassroots and another from international sources—to influence policy. Like most governments, Iran's was sensitive to international opinion. International opinion, in turn, was tilting in favor of women's rights. The concept of women's rights is a natural concomitant of the concept of human rights. Once the idea of human rights was codified in a universal declaration, it was natural that the idea of women's rights would follow. Indeed, by the 1970s, most states had begun to accept, at least in theory, the importance of recognizing and promoting women's rights. Iran's

delegation played a central role in drawing up the World Plan of Action at the United Nations' First World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City in 1975. The Plan of Action was the model on which we based a national plan that the Iranian government adopted in 1978 to integrate women's interests in the governmental decision making structures and processes at the national, as well as at provincial and local levels.

In late October 1978, I traveled to New York to negotiate the final points in the contract between the government of Iran and the United Nations to set up the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) in Tehran. Negotiations took longer than expected. By the time they were concluded the situation in Iran had progressed from unrest to revolution. The fundamentalists threatened daily to bomb WOI centers and harm its members and staff. My colleagues advised me that I was a prime target of their wrath and that it would be best for everyone if I postponed my return. Soon, however, the revolution erupted, and I found myself in exile. WOI headquarters was ransacked, its branches disbanded, and its activists forced into hiding. My home was confiscated, and I was declared a "corrupter on earth and at war with God."

The Islamic revolution undid much that we had accomplished. Among other things, the new regime nullified the family protection law, made divorce once again the prerogative of the husband, legalized polygamy, and reduced the age of marriage for girls to nine. Women were banned from a large number of professions. University fields of study leading to careers in those professions were closed to women. Gender segregation in all public places was encoded into law. The dress code was strictly enforced, making Islamic dress obligatory for all.

Women, however, resisted the regime's encroachments and in time retrieved some of the social and economic—though not family—rights they had lost. Their demands and struggles, begun in the midst of the revolution, remain to this day a major source of state-society tension in post-revolution Iran, proving that once rights are consciously gained, they may not be retrenched without heavy political cost.

In the United States, I continued my communications with my international colleagues. Robin Morgan asked me to write the Iran chapter for a volume she was editing called *Sisterhood Is Global: An*

Anthology of the International Women's Movement. In 1984, I joined the other contributors to the anthology as a member of a new organization called the Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI), which Robin co-founded to promote the rights of women across the world. For the next fifteen years I was active in SIGI as a member, vice-president, executive director, and finally as president.

The lessons I learned from my experiences in Iran helped me better understand the problems of the developing countries, particularly the predicament of women in the Muslim societies of North Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia. My contacts with women in these societies during the years I was active in SIGI supported my experiences in Iran, but also helped me to refine my understanding. In all of these societies there exists a critical mass of educated women who wish to change the dominant discourse in

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order to gain rights, not only for themselves, but also for their sisters in their own and in other countries. Many of them teach in schools ranging from elementary to higher education, and thereby have direct access to the youth. In countries where a virtual gender apartheid reigns, such as some states

around the Persian Gulf, their numbers relative to society as a whole are even larger because women at all levels are allowed to be taught only by women. Women in all Muslim societies are faced with a patriarchal order that posits itself as the rightful interpreter of Islam and is strong enough to declare its parochial interest the interest of all, even if it rules by force rather than by consent.

These women are not helpless. They have powerful potential. Because the problems of tradition and modernity are posed more vividly for them, they are at the forefront of the struggle to reconcile the universality of human rights with the specificity of religious and cultural contexts. They are the future of Muslim societies, if the future is to accord with democracy and civility. Because of the growing disparity between North and South in access to information, the most pivotal need at the moment is to provide women of the South with the necessary tools to participate in the global dialogue that increasingly affects decisions about economic transfers, grassroots developments, gender parity, and individual rights, among others.

Believing in this, after the end of my term as SIGI's president in

December 1999, I launched the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace (WLP), an organization dedicated to empowering women through dialogue, choice, and participation to restructure their roles and to improve their status in their families, communities, and societies. An important goal of our organization is to provide women and girls of the Global South with the practical skills and technical knowledge to participate in the international dialogue about rights, development, and peace.

Women in the South need to learn from each other and share experiences. They must have access to the North's best practices in social relations, political interaction, human development, and individual rights. Equally important, their visions, values, and solutions must be represented in the international forums where general models are developed, discourses determined, and resources allocated. Women in the South also have much to contribute in wisdom, acumen, and moral courage. All this requires access to modern information and communications technologies—radio, video/television, CD-ROM, and the Internet. We therefore provide multimedia educational training materials, computers, and other tools to women's nongovernmental organizations as part of our strategy to advance women's involvement in critical decision-making processes. More importantly, the contents of our educational material are shaped, through rigorous local testing, according to the needs defined in communities for which the materials have been designed. All our work is done in collaboration with national and local nongovernmental organizations.

At the threshold of the new century, the tensions between modernity and tradition are felt even more strongly than when I began my career thirty years ago. The world is more closely connected, information is instantly available across the globe, and economic forces have made societies more interdependent. But whereas in the past modernity was equated with Westernization, in the future it will be increasingly defined as achieving the ability to cope and to compete at the global level. Cultures will have to reflect both the local and the global, and women will increasingly be the bridge that connects the two, because of the type of authority and organization best suited to that process. Contrary to past forms of organized action, effective leadership in global productive relations in the twenty-first century will be horizontal and communicative rather than vertical and command-oriented. Women's historical

experiences in nurturing families and communities have made them well suited to the new patterns of leadership. Therefore, even if initially the prevailing patriarchal conditions across the world prevent women from participating in these relationships, women's leadership patterns will have to be adopted if the system is to succeed. The change will necessarily increase women's input in the interactive processes. Moreover, women have focused on building interactive networks at local, national, and international levels, an activity instrumental to connecting specific local conditions to more abstract universal realities as we strive to shape the actual and virtual civil societies of the future. It is essential that the international community helps provide the tools women need to effect these connections.

Iran's "Virtual Democracy" at a Turning Point

Jahangir Amuzegar

Hojatol-Eslam Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's upset victory in Iran's 1997 presidential election was widely interpreted as the reflection of popular yearnings for change. It was also seen as a clear sign of the "revolution fatigue" caused by eighteen years of revolutionary excesses, civil rights violations, and intolerable puritanical restrictions imposed by a theocratic oligarchy on the people's daily life.

By lineage, training, revolutionary involvement, family ties, and government service, Mohammad Khatami is a solid clerical establishment figure. He is no iconoclast. In fact, his presidential ambition has not been to *end* the Islamic regime, but to *save* it. He wants to show the world that Islam and democracy can coexist. Even though the expected *change* was for *continuity's* sake, his election was greeted as a good omen for establishing a kinder and gentler Islam. More pointedly, he won his stunning victory over a powerful and leading conservative rival on the strength of a highly attractive reform agenda: to enforce the rule of law and promote civil society at home, to improve diplomatic relations with the outside world, and to revive and restructure the ailing economy.

Khatami's success in holding the first ever municipal council elections in early 1998, when his supporters and independent candidates won the majority of council seats, raised further hopes for the success of his reform agenda. And the two rounds of the February-May 2000 nationwide parliamentary elections, in which reformist candidates won a landslide victory over the hard-line

Jahangir Amuzegar, former finance minister of Iran, is an international economic consultant based in Washington, D.C. He is a former faculty member of the Paul H. Nitze School for Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University and a frequent contributor to *SAIS Review*.