

# The Women's Movement

## Haleh Esfandiari

- Since the 1979 revolution, women have struggled to regain lost rights and win a larger role in society, despite a regime unfriendly to women's issues.
- The theocracy's suspension of the Family Protection Law enacted under the monarchy once again put women at the mercy of men in the family.
- Women fared modestly in politics. They won positions in parliament, city councils, cabinet and other decision-making jobs, but in small numbers.
- But women made significant gains in education, particularly after obstacles to certain specialized fields were removed.
- After initially pushing for rapid population growth, the government launched a highly successful family planning program. Iran's birth rate went from one of the highest to one of the lowest in the region. The budget for this program, however, was eliminated in 2012.
- President Hassan Rouhani's first two years in office were a mixed bag for women. For example, Rouhani appointed four women as vice presidents and three women as governors but did not name women to his cabinet or revive the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

## Overview

Iranian women made considerable progress during the Pahlavi era (1925-1979). Education for both girls and boys was free. When Tehran University opened in 1936, Iran's first university admitted both men and women. In 1963, women acquired the right to vote and run for parliament. Under the Family Protection Law, women won the right to petition for divorce and gain child custody. A husband could no longer unilaterally divorce his wife or automatically gain custody of the children. The marriage age for girls was raised from 13 to 18. And men needed the court's permission to take a second wife. By 1978, on the eve of Iran's revolution, 22 women sat in parliament and 333 women served on elected local councils. One-third of university students were female. Two million women were in the work force, more than 146,000 of them in the civil service.

The 1979 revolution politicized the mass of Iranian women. But women's expectations were not realized. The new theocracy systematically rolled back five decades of

progress in women's rights. Women were purged from government positions. All females, including girls in first grade, were forced to observe the hejab, or Islamic dress code. Family laws were scrapped. For the next three decades, however, the energy Iranian women displayed during the revolution propelled them deeper into the public arena to regain their rights. The result is one of the most dynamic women's movements in the Islamic world, and female activists who have won international recognition in a wide array of professions.

## **The Khomeini decade 1979-1989**

Under revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's new theocracy gave priority to Islamic tradition over modern mores. One of the revolutionary government's first acts was to suspend the Family Protection Law and dismantle Family Courts. Men were once again free to divorce their wives by simple declaration; they also gained exclusive custody of their children. Women could no longer file for divorce unless the right was stipulated in marriage contracts, and they lost the right to child custody. Restrictions on polygamy were also removed. The marriage age for girls was reduced to puberty, which is nine under Islamic law. In 1981, parliament approved the Islamic Law of Retribution, introducing flogging, stoning and payment of blood money for crimes ranging from adultery to violation of Islamic dress codes.

Professionally, women were slowly pushed into traditional female fields, such as teaching and nursing. Women were barred from becoming judges. Government-run day care centers were closed, making it difficult for women to stay in jobs anyway. At universities, the idea of segregating women and men was soon abandoned as impractical, but it took several years before bars were removed on certain fields of education – in turn affecting job prospects.

Politically, women held on to the right to vote and run for parliament. Four women were elected to the first parliament in 1980, and later sat on local councils. But most women in decision-making positions were either dismissed, given early retirement, or demoted. A decade passed before the first woman was named deputy minister, 17 years passed before a woman was appointed vice president, and 30 years passed before the Islamic Republic named its first female minister. The constitution bars women from the position of supreme leader – the highest post in the country – but does not stipulate the gender of the president or cabinet members. Women have tried to run in presidential elections, but they have all been disqualified.

On social issues, the theocracy's initial policies were harsh. Hejab, or Islamic dress and head cover, was forcibly imposed. Showing a bit of hair became punishable, with penalties ranging from heavy monetary fines to 70 lashes. The regime also attempted to segregate men and women in public places, but did not succeed. But the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) had a galvanizing influence on the status of women. Women

were drawn into the work force as nurses, doctors and support for soldiers on the war front. In the absence of men, many women became the family bread winners. During the revolution's first decade, women in the work force fell from about 13 percent to 8.6 percent.

### **The Rafsanjani presidency 1989-1997**

After the war, women became pivotal politically. They voted in substantial numbers for Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani for president in 1989, and again in 1993 because he was pragmatic on women's issues. Rafsanjani gradually eased social controls. Women were harassed less on the streets. They benefited from minor changes in the personal status law and were able to participate in international sports competitions. The number of girls in schools and universities soared.

Rafsanjani also reversed the Islamic Republic's policy of encouraging large families and launched a family planning program to curb Iran's alarmingly rapid rate of population growth. The success of this program is one of the Islamic Republic's most striking achievements. The total fertility rate (the average number of births per woman) dropped from 5.6 in the early 1980s to 2.0 in 2000, and to 1.9 births per woman in 2006. The decline has been particularly impressive in rural areas where the average number of births per woman dropped in one generation from 8.1 to 2.1. As a result, the annual rate of natural population increase declined from 3.2 percent in early 1980s to 1.8 percent in 2006.

### **The Khatami years 1997-2005**

Women fared even better during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami. Riding on a wave of pro-reform sentiment, he appointed a handful of women to prominent posts. Among them: Masoumeh Ebtekar was his vice president for the environment and Zahra Rahnavard became the first woman chancellor of an Iranian university. In 2004, 13 women were elected to parliament – the largest number since the revolution.

Under Khatami, women also scored several legal victories. Pressure from women led the government to reintroduce modified parts of the suspended Family Protection Law. Women judges became special advisors to presiding clerics on special family courts. In 1994, parliament enacted a law awarding a woman monetary compensation when her husband initiated divorce proceedings and she was not at fault. In 2002, parliament raised the age of marriage for girls from nine to 13. The ban on unaccompanied single women studying abroad on government scholarships was also lifted. Khatami's presidency also saw the burgeoning of non-government organizations that laid the foundation for a more vibrant civil society. Many were founded around women's issues.

## **The Ahmadinejad years    2005-2013**

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad struggled to balance rival trends at a time women carried growing weight at the ballot box. He faced deepening resolve among hardliners to curb the female quest for full equality; he was also confronted by public pressure from women not to be relegated to second-class status again.

Under hardliners, women generally fared poorly on several fronts. The momentum for change built up over the previous 16 years virtually evaporated. The government closed down *Zanan*, the country's leading feminist magazine. In 2007 elections, only 43 women were elected to local councils out of tens of thousands of seats. In the 2008 parliamentary elections, the only two reformist women in parliament were voted out. Of 7,168 candidates, 585 were women, but only nine were elected. Police cracked down on women for dress code violations. Ahmadinejad also called on women to have more children.

In the June 2009 presidential campaign, tens of thousands of women from all social classes supported the two reformist candidates who backed greater women's rights. For the first time, candidates had women advising and campaigning for them in public. After the election, Ahmadinejad lost the support of a large number of conservative women because of atrocities committed by the security forces against protesters. He was noticeably silent on the trials and harsh on the sentencing of women, allegations of rape and torture of detainees, and the mistreatment of women protesting the detention of relatives.

After his reelection, Ahmadinejad nominated three women to his cabinet. But only one of his nominees, Marzieh-Vahid Dastjerd as minister of health, was approved by parliament because of objections by a number of leading clerics and conservative politicians. After his reelection, Ahmadinejad nominated three women to his cabinet. However, due to the opposition of leading clerics and conservative politicians, only one of his nominees, Marzieh Vahid-Dastjerdi, as minister of health, was approved by parliament. She did not last; Ahmadinejad dismissed Dastjerdi in December 2012.

During Ahmadinejad's last year in office, the government eliminated the budget for family planning, thus ending one of the most successful programs of its kind in the world; and, encouraged by the Ministry of Higher Education, several universities decided to ban female students from a number of fields of study. The government, however, never managed to implement this plan.

## **The Rouhani years    2013-**

Hassan Rouhani's first two years in office were a mixed bag for women. Rouhani did not name women to his cabinet or revive the Ministry for Women's Affairs as he had

promised during his election campaign in 2013; he realized the conservative majority in parliament would not approve. However, he appointed four women as vice presidents, including Masoumeh Ebtekar as head of the Environmental Protection Organization and Shahindokht Molaverdi as vice president for women and family affairs. Rouhani also instructed each of his cabinet members to appoint at least one woman as a deputy minister. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif named a woman, Marziyeh Afkham, a diplomat for 30 years, as the ministry's spokesperson.

For the first time in Iran, Rouhani also appointed three women as governors of smaller governorates: Qeshm Island, Hamoon and Qasr-e Qand. Where women were concerned, Rouhani's hands remained tied by the conservative majority in parliament, including eight of only nine women lawmakers; by the clerical community; and by the conservative domination of political institutions. Women activists looked to the 2016 parliamentary elections to produce a reformist, gender-friendly majority.

Rouhani had more visible success in the social sphere. In major urban centers, the morals police were reined in. Women felt freer to wear more provocative and colorful outfits, heavy makeup, and fashionable hair covers. Women designers and private fashion shows became part of the social scene. The president went so far as to say that the police should enforce the law rather than Islam. Women entrepreneurs continued to head companies and start-ups.

In the political sphere, Rouhani proved unable to rein in, much less to control, the security organizations or the judiciary. In the early months of his presidency, Rouhani secured the release from prison of human rights lawyer Nasrine Sotoudeh and seven other women activists. However, arrests, trials and long prison terms of women activists, bloggers and critics of the government continued. Rouhani was also unable to prevent the closure of the women's magazine, "Zanane- Emrouz," one year and 11 issues after it hit newsstands. The magazine was in reality a revival of "Zanan", the most progressive feminist magazine to appear under the Islamic Republic; it was banned under Ahmadinejad in 2006. The Family Law with its many provisions that treat women unfairly has not been revisited. The age of marriage continues to be 13 for girls. The law still allows polygamy and temporary marriage. Married women still need their husbands' permission to travel, and single women need their fathers' permission to get a passport.

Rouhani has had to deal with a legion of issues that are indicative of antiquated thinking among politicians and lawmakers. Parliament passed a bill in October 2013 that would permit men to marry their adopted daughters, even as young as 13. In July 2014, Tehran mayor Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, ordered the segregation of men and women in municipal offices. The ordinance was never implemented. The chief of police in Tehran barred women from working as waitresses in cafes, although he allowed them to continue working in restaurant kitchens. The measure was not practical

because of the high rate of unemployment among women, some 18.9 percent. Still, Rouhani could have relied on the support of an ardent constituency if he were willing to show more courage in pushing for women's rights.

## **Factoids**

- In the 2009 election, 42 women registered to run for the presidency. All were disqualified by the Guardian Council. But for the first time, the council also indicated that women were not banned from running for the top political job.
- Because of growing pressure from both reformers and conservatives, women's rights became one of the four top issues in the 2009 presidential election. All four candidates developed positions on women's issues.
- In 2010, 65 percent of all university students were female. But by the 2012-2013 school year, only 48.2 percent were female, allegedly due to gender rationing policies implemented in 2012, according to the United Nations.
- In the election for the ninth parliament (2012- ), nine women were elected to the 290-member body.
- In 2012, the budget for Iran's family planning program was eliminated. Alarmed by a rapidly aging population, the supreme leader called on women to have more children.
- In the 2013 presidential election, some 30 women registered to run. But they were all disqualified.
- In the 2014 U.N. gender inequality index Iran ranked 109 out of 152 countries, with one being the best in terms of gender equality.

## **Prominent women**

**Farrokhru Parsa**, the minister of education, was the first woman named to a cabinet position in 1968.

**Marziyeh Afkham**, a career diplomat, was appointed as Iran's first female foreign ministry spokesperson in 2013.

**Mahnaz Afkhami** was named minister of state for women's affairs in 1975.

**Mehrangiz Dowlatshahi** was the first Iranian woman to be appointed as Ambassador. She served as Ambassador to Denmark in 1975-1979 and was still Ambassador when the revolution occurred.

**Simin Behbahani**, one of Iran's greatest female poets, used her poetry to describe social and cultural deprivations, both before and after the revolution. Born in 1927, she was beaten up by police during a demonstration on International Women's Day in 2006, and in 2010 was prevented from leaving Iran to accept a prize in Paris. She passed away in 2014.

**Masoumeh Ebtekar** became Iran's first female vice president during the reform era of President Mohammad Khatami. Under President Hassan Rouhani, she was again appointed vice president and head of the Environmental Protection Organization. She was also a spokeswoman for the students who seized the U.S. Embassy in 1979.

**Shahla Sherkat**, editor of *Zanan*, the leading feminist journalist under the Islamic Republic. *Zanan* was shut down in 2008, after 16 years of publication.

**Faezeh Hashemi**, Rafsanjani's daughter, became a symbol of women's expanding role in the 1990s. She founded the Islamic Countries' Women's Sports Solidarity Council In 1992. She was elected to parliament for one term in 1996. And in 1998, she founded the first women's daily newspaper, *Zan* or "Woman." The paper was closed by the authorities in 1999.

**Samira Makhmalbaf**, one of several female filmmakers, was the youngest director to show a film at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival – at the age of 18. She won her first prize at Cannes for her second film at the age of 20.

**Shirin Ebadi**, the first female judge in Iran during the monarchy, and a human rights lawyer, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. The first Iranian and first Muslim woman laureate, she used the prize money to establish the Center for Defense of Human Rights, which was closed by security officials in 2010. Ebadi went into exile.

Under Ahmadinejad, **Nasrine Soltankhah** was vice president for science and technology. She was also head of the Center for Women and Family Affairs (formerly called the Center for Women's Participation, or CWP) and an advisor to the president on women's issues. **Fatemeh Javadi** was vice president for the environment under Ahmadinejad.

**Zahra Rahnavard** was the first female university chancellor and wife of former Prime Minister and 2009 presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. Appointed by Khatami, she was removed when hardliners took political control. Ahmadinejad questioned her academic credentials during the televised campaign debates, a move that backfired on him among women. She was the first wife to campaign for her husband. She later became a spokesperson for the opposition Green Movement after her husband lost.

Rahnavard has been under house arrest along with her husband and Mehdi Karroubi, another opposition leader, since 2011.

The **One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality** is a movement launched in 2006 to secure one million signatures on petitions demanding equal rights for women in all spheres. Under Ahmadinejad, several organizers were arrested, put on trial and sentenced to prison terms. The government tried to crush the campaign, but did not succeed.

## **Trendlines**

- Since 1979, women have persistently emerged as one of the most dynamic political forces in the Islamic Republic. Despite many obstacles, they have won considerable freedom in education, employment, the public sphere and personal dress – all of which will be difficult to completely roll back.
- The struggle for women’s rights is central to the larger struggle for individual rights. It has become one of the four top issues in national elections.
- Women’s issues are important to both the modern and traditional sectors of society. So the pressure for expanded rights will continue, no matter who is in power.

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