On 7 March 1979, less than a month after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the then supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, demanded that the transitional government ban unveiled women from entering or working in government premises. The next day, and for several days after, thousands of women staged spontaneous street demonstrations and sit-ins in front of government buildings in many cities across Iran. The largest demonstration started on 8 March at the University of Tehran, where, for the first time since the 1953 U.S.-funded coup d’etat that brought down the popularly elected nationalist government of Mohammad Mosadegh, a coalition of Iranian feminist groups were marking International Women’s Day with a conference. The conference was well attended by international feminists, including a group of French feminists who collaborated with Iranian activists in filming the women’s protests and making the only documentary to date about this historic moment.¹

The Tehran protest covered large city blocks along just renamed Revolution Street, extending to the headquarters of National Radio and Television (today known as Seda va Sima) and the Ministry of Justice. Many men — mostly leftist activists — joined the protests and some acted as human barriers between women and the torrents of fundamentalists who came at them with sticks, chains and utility knives. This was the unorganized early version of what we know today as the Basij militia. The protestors’ message was simple: “We revolted in order to be equal.” The popular slogan was “dar to-e azadi, jay-e haq-e zan khali” (in the dawn of freedom women’s rights are missing).

However, the ideologues and leaders of the male-dominated political organizations that were soon to stage their
own opposition to the Islamic government, and lose, abandoned women, arguing that
gender equality could only be defined as a byproduct of socialist and/or democratic
systems, and that women’s rights at that moment were secondary to the class struggle
and the larger struggle for democracy. Women were thus literally and ideologically
beaten back into submission. Mandatory veiling, soon extending beyond government
buildings to encompass all public places, was one in a series of concerted attacks on the
civil and legal rights and personal freedoms of women, including taking away divorce,
custody and travel rights, and limiting women’s fields of study and work.

In spite of this historical setback, over the past 10 years women’s rights activists
have been using highly creative and diverse forms of social and political engagement
to once again mount a serious and radical campaign for change in Iran. Resisting
repeated attacks, women’s groups have articulated major legal and political challenges
to the fundamentalists’ rule by demanding changes to the constitution of the Islamic
Republic toward full equal rights for women (for example, the One Million Signature
Campaign), and, simultaneously, mobilizing women to break down social and cultural
barriers such as gender-based violence, poverty and unemployment.

In a remarkable recent documentary titled *We Are Half of Iran’s Population* feminist
Iranian filmmaker Rakhsan Bani-Etemad interviews a large number of women,
including students and housewives alongside political personalities, researchers and
women’s rights activists from diverse political/ideological formations who work in many
different areas of research and activism. Made over the few months prior to the
12 June 2009 elections, and released on YouTube just a week before election day,
the film also briefly looks at the activist coalitions that were created this past spring
in order to take advantage of the brief opening in the public sphere for discussing
women’s agendas and their needs and demands during the presidential campaign. A
common question the director asks of the interviewees is what demands they have
of the presidential candidates and on what basis they will decide whom to vote for.
The footage is then played back to three out of four candidates (Ahmadinejad did not
respond to Bani-Etemad’s invitation to participate), and the candidates’ responses to
women’s demands recorded as part of the documentary.

The majority of activists in the film — from Islamic, secular-nationalist and/or leftist
orientations — demand fundamental changes to the discriminatory legal and political
frameworks in Iran, including changing the sections of the constitution that enshrine
discrimination against women. Other demands include joining the UN Convention
on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (the Islamic
Republic of Iran is not a signatory yet), opening economic, social and political
opportunities for women, guaranteeing the right of women to organize politically, and
several social policy demands, including social spending to create work opportunities
and equal rights to education for women. Many of those featured in the film argue
that these measures should not be labeled women’s concerns only, as they benefit the
entire society and therefore must be priority concerns of the society as a whole in this
election round.

In their turn, the three candidates — Mehdi Karroubi, Mir-Hossein Mousavi (the
leader of the so-called Green Movement) and Mohsen Rezaee — and their advisors
and/or wives, while acknowledging women’s active contributions in the 1979
Revolution and to socio-political life, pay lip service to only some of the issues raised
by women, stopping short of formulating concrete responses to the questions asked
of them. Most interesting and evasive is Mousavi’s response. He insists that given the
“traditional” dominant culture in Iran, any solutions to women’s issues must be in ad-
herence with tradition. His conservatism comes as a shock even to his fully
veiled wife, Zahra Rahnavard, who, jumps in at one point to say that the
executive branch has both the responsibility and the means to change laws
and conditions. Mousavi’s response is reminiscent of Mehdi
Bazargan’s — he was the Prime Minister of the 1979 Transitional Government,
who responded to Khomeini’s decree and women’s protests by issuing a
statement saying that although he did not agree with mandatory veiling, the
women in his own family and those of his cabinet ministers had always been
veiled in accordance with their Islamic faith and traditions, and followed that
by signing policy letters that barred women judges from presiding in
courtrooms and closed government buildings to unveiled women.

Rakhsan Bani-Etemad’s timely intervention brilliantly displays the
fundamentalism inherent in the views of all of the candidates and their
inability to respond meaningfully to people’s demands. It leaves no doubts
about the futility of supporting one candidate over the others, as it correctly
shows them all as part of the same regressive political discourse that has
dominated Iran for the past 30 years.

During the post-election events in June and July 2009, while the world
focused on street demonstrations and/or behind-the-curtain negotiations
between political factions and presidential candidates and their cleric supporters/
foes, many commentators and observers expressed surprise at the strong
presence of women on the streets. Such commentaries showed a complete lack of familiarity with Iranian
history and an ignorance of current grassroots political dynamics. Bani-
Etemad’s documentary shows a highly organized, home-grown and broad
based women’s rights movement that has, over at least a decade of overt
activism and three decades of resistance, created the socio-cultural conditions for women to participate not just as so many bodies in street demonstrations, but as significant voices in the country's political discourse. It was no accident that many women's rights activists and their legal teams were among the first to be arrested — in their offices and homes or on the streets — as the post-election uprising started. The guardians of the Islamic Republic were quite clear that the persistent daily work of these activists, and the vast networks they have created in collaboration with students, workers and ethnic rights activists, had directly contributed to the massive shift in the country's political culture and prepared the ground for a broad mobilization of ordinary people in the political process and the ensuing mass protests.

For the progressive people of the world to show solidarity with the grassroots struggles for change in Iran, it is not enough to rally around the face of Neda Aghasoltan, a female accidental victim, or hail Momani, an accidental leader who by now has almost completely lost any popular support and disappeared from the picture. It is not enough to get on the green band wagon carrying viral songs by this or that Western band or to applaud disconnected diasporic born-again politicos playing "radical chic" by sporting green dresses and scarves in international film festivals. It is essential to recognize and support the articulate and organized progressive forces in Iran. The Iranian women’s movement is not a U.S. feminist majority export; it didn’t start organizing in June 2009, and it is not a momentary engagement. It is one of the most radical oppositions to the ruling elite, as it challenges the very foundations of the fundamentalist patriarchal system that governs Iran. This is the "third voice."

Become familiar with it. Amplify it. Broadcast it.


Notes:
1. The documentary, simply titled 8th March 1979, is available at http://video.google.ckr/videoplay?docid=-88425891849548867458&hl=de
2. We Are Half of Iran’s Population is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_BinbfndI

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