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Iran

# Women in resistance in Iran - a historical view

- Features - Feminism -

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### **The women's movement in Iran since the 1979 revolution against the conditions of inferiority and oppression they suffer is the result of two contradictory processes. [1]**

On the one hand, the experience of the massive participation of women in the 1979 revolution, accompanied by various developments specific to that time: development of urbanization, culture, means of communication and globalization of knowledge resources, and the raising of the level of knowledge.

On the other hand, the advent of a dictatorial and retrograde Islamic-capitalist regime, which does everything in its power to make women the equivalent of half a man.

The women's movement results from the confrontation of these two processes and generates daily resistance to the injustice and violence of the patriarchal state, struggles big and small to acquire progressive social norms, freedom and substantive equality. This movement is multidimensional and affects several areas.

Driven by the desire to reappropriate the public space marked by patriarchy, many young women struggle to participate in all social, cultural, scientific, artistic, sporting and other activities.

They struggle daily to free themselves, in fact, from the prohibitions imposed by law or tradition; they reject the compulsory veil, forced marriage and way of life; they stand up against apartheid and segregation in public places or at home.

And also, they face together the common problems in the working-class neighbourhoods by managing the daily life of the neighbourhood through their collective initiatives.

We can see in all this ferment the emergence of a real movement, and it is in this context that even individual initiatives such as the refusal to wear the veil are part of a common approach, and therefore part of a collective choice of emancipation from the established order.

Also, the growing numbers of divorces initiated by women show that they refuse to suffer a marital hell in the name of the sacrosanct family or tradition, despite a retrograde family code that does not recognize the woman as an individual.

The massive participation of women in large and small protests and popular demonstrations shows that no social or political movement will be made without women and that in order to achieve equality, women must stand up against the existing regime as a whole.

But before detailing these points, I will refer to the contemporary history of the women's movement in Iran. In fact, this movement existed long before the advent of the 1979 revolution. It dates back to the constitutional revolution of 1906-1907 heralding Iran's entry into the capitalist era and modernity.

Women's groups had directly participated in this revolution by taking up arms against the absolutists. As a result of this revolution, the efforts of progressive women, mainly from the nobility, focused on the publication of women's magazines and the foundation of schools for girls.

## Women in resistance in Iran - a historical view

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The coup d'état by the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, which was immediately followed by his dictatorship, put an end to the organizational plurality of progressive women, and resulted in the establishment of a single central and docile body for women's affairs. His policy of a supposed modernization of social life limited the power of the clergy and resulted, among other things, in the Westernization of the mode of dress, and finally the forced unveiling of women.

After the abdication of the first Pahlavi, and until the military coup of the second, a period of relative democracy began. Women's organizations, mainly dependent on political parties such as the pro-Soviet Tudeh party and nationalist parties, were created. They were dedicated to cultural and political activities.

After the coup d'état by the second Pahlavi in 1953 with American help and the re-establishment of the dictatorship, all political and democratic organizations were dissolved. Then a body responsible for women's affairs was set up by the monarch.

Following the agrarian reform desired by the US administration for friendly countries in the "Third World" (as a result of the mass migration of agrarian workers to the cities and the accelerated development of capitalism), the right to vote was granted to women in 1962, in a country where free elections were a dream even for men.

Later in 1974, under the Family Code, certain laws in favour of women were legislated.

During the reign of the second Pahlavi, especially in the decade before his fall, more and more women joined clandestine political organizations to fight against the dictatorial monarchical regime. Finally, women played a key role in the democratic and anti-monarchical revolution of 1979; most of those who believed in social justice and freedom give themselves entirely to this cause.

Shortly after the revolution, the Islamic regime began its exercise of power with a decisive attack on women's rights. On the eve of 8 March 1979, Khomeini announced the obligation for women to wear the veil in all public places. The response of a large number of women was not long in coming: a large mass demonstration was held on March 8 and lasted for several days with the cry "we did not make the revolution to go back".

This is how the Islamic regime announced and began its reign, by imposing the Islamic veil on women. The veil is the social visibility of this regime and it had now made it its standard.

Since this blow to women's rights, the response of the Islamic regime to all social protests is repression alone, but despite this the social movements in general and the women's movement in particular have not given up and are advancing, whatever the cost, towards a better future.

Despite the repressive and retrograde nature of the Islamic regime, the irreversible process generated by technological progress and the accessibility of the means of communication and education, and the resulting increase in the general cultural level, meant that women entered social activities on a massive scale. Lifestyle and social norms are changing: while the legal age of marriage is 13 for girls, the average age of marriage for women is 23. It should also be added that the marriage of girls under the age of 13 is still however significant. Indeed, child marriage between the ages of 10 and 14 constitutes 5.5% of all marriages, that of children under 18 is 17%. The main cause of child marriage is growing poverty. This is to feed one less mouth rather than respect tradition. The law allowing the age of 13 for marriage of girls or even less (15 years for boys) is in fact the criminal response of the clerical regime to this growing poverty; it deprives girls of the right to childhood and thus confirms the catastrophic economic situation in which many citizens find themselves. Poverty not only pushes girls to marry so early, but also forces children, girls or boys, to work, to perform unhealthy tasks on the street, and thus leaves them open to the

worst of abuses.

As for women's higher education, 56% of students in public universities are female (here too, it should be added that at the same time the number of girls deprived of general education in some regions is alarming). In any case, the high rate of female students does not rhyme in any way with their future situation on the labour market: 65.9% of women are unemployed after leaving higher education as against a rate for men of 26.10%

In general, the unemployment rate for women is twice as high as for men. According to official sources, the employment rate for women is 13%. Women work longer and earn less than men; the average wage for women is 77% of that of men. Women are mainly hired for precarious, arduous and marginal work.

The massive unemployment of women pushes women from the working classes into the informal sector (home products, cooking, culture, household, hairdressing, street vending) where workers are deprived of all rights and social security coverage. This sector has 10 million workers, without any social insurance, 25% of whom are women; so, about 2.5 million women work in the informal sector.

Women working in the formal sector are for the most part under the fixed term "white" contract (blank cheque, arbitrary conditions imposed by the employers) in small factories with fewer than 5 workers, where all workers are excluded from the employment code and social security coverage.

In the working population under social security coverage (concerning the largest insurance scheme in Iran) 80% are men and 20% are women. Obviously, being under social security does not necessarily mean decent employment, with a living wage, and job security. In agriculture, many women work hard, but remain invisible in official statistics. In any case, they are not considered as employees.

One third of employed women work in cities and in public services (school, health, assistance, administration). On the other hand, in private services (large and small shops, hotels, restaurants) they are the least numerous. In fact, in the private sector too, they work more in schools, hospitals and offices. In industry, they are about 8% in factories with more than 10 workers. Women are more numerous in workshops with fewer than 10 workers, especially in textiles and carpet weaving.

The number of permanent women workers is constantly decreasing. Female workers often work as subcontractors; in temporary or seasonal work, and in establishments where the delay in the payment of wages can stretch to several months. These workers are underpaid, even less than the already meagre salary of their male colleagues already below the poverty line (the minimum wage is equivalent to about €120, while the official poverty line is equivalent to €276, the real threshold being twice as much). Women workers working in the small business sector constitute the most exploited and vulnerable layer of the working class in Iran. They form, in fact, the most significant reserve army of labour.

They are usually separated from men in the workplace. This is not only the sexual division of labour, but also the apartheid policy in force in the Islamic Republic. It is no secret that patriarchy and the oppression of women go hand in hand with the capitalist system; and it is obvious that the sexual division of the social organization of labour under capitalism, in a country like Iran, is further strengthened. The entire legal and repressive arsenal is at its service. And it is for this reason that the action of the workers' movement with respect to the oppression and segregation of women is of major importance.

The drastic reduction in the budget for public services and subsidies has made life even more difficult for working-class women, especially since, with the tightening of working conditions and the deterioration of living

standards, the scale of domestic violence is becoming increasingly great. It is obvious that with the deterioration of economic and social conditions, phenomena such as children left to work on the street (their number is estimated at 3 million), runaway adolescent girls (without statistics), and child prostitution are accelerating.

I return to the political dimension of the women's movement. There has been talk of women, especially young people, refusing to wear the veil. Despite its appearance, the veil under the Islamic regime is more than a clothing accessory. It is an ostentatious sign of women's oppression and institutional inferiority. A veil removed or even moved back directly targets the foundation of the Islamic regime. The rejection of the veil really goes against the foundation of this regime and its social visibility; it therefore has a political character.

Thus, in the wake of the nationwide popular protests of winter 2017, some young women known as "girls of the Avenue of the Revolution" in a symbolic act threw their veils in the street. They were later sentenced to long prison terms. There was a massive presence of women in the demonstrations of winter 2017 that were held in more than 80 cities. This is not the first time since 1979. In 2009 during the protest movement that erupted following massive electoral fraud, women played a significant role in the processions, and also in the radicalization of this movement (which evolved in a few months from an electoral demand and support for a losing candidate from the same regime to a questioning of the entire regime.)

And it is also a turning point in the visible part of the women's movement in Iran, whose leadership was previously held by a current that worked either in partnership with one faction (dubbed "Reformer") of the regime, or by soliciting the other faction (dubbed "Conservative" or the Clergy) to satisfy their demands (small changes to the penal code and family code) which have become in truth demands for grievances.

I will briefly talk about the history of this tendency in the women's movement in Iran. Initially, after the widespread protests over the Islamic veil in 1979, the women's movement suffered a great defeat following the introduction of Islamic legislation. After the Iran/Iraq war (and in the early 1990s) a current arose among Islamist activists (Islamist feminists) to improve certain Islamic laws governing the status of women. Then with the coming to power of the reformers (Khatami) in 1997, another current among secular activists was born (this current is referred to by the title liberal feminism, for lack of a more suitable name).

The activists of this current, invoking the false Tradition/Modernity paradigm, advocated cultural activity as the key to the emancipation of women in a traditional society opening up to modernity (whereas the modernity acquired over the past century is a capitalist society). They had also offered to make demands concerning certain aspects of the legal status of women, in harmony with the reformers in power whom they supported strategically.

After a few years of supporting the reformers and finally disappointed by them, they diverted their legal demands from the "grand structures" of politics, turning to the Clergy and the Conservatives, that is to say the real holders of power (as they themselves said), and lobbying the latter as their main lever. The aftermath of the outbreak of events in 2009, and the radicalization of this movement with the massive and active participation of women, put an end to the leadership of this current.

As for the women's movement, it has continued its profound development. Eight years later, during the social explosion of winter 2017, women were massively present in this movement. Also, in the demonstrations of pensioners and the strikes of teaching staff (the majority of them women) their active presence has given a feminine face to these movements.

I have tried to present the characteristic features of the women's movement, this is the tip of the iceberg. I will now try to draw a few more in-depth conclusions.

The women's movement obviously concerns all women, I mean it is general and is not reserved for a class or a social layer. However, with regard to the choice of orientation and the priorities that flow from it, different strategies are necessarily developed according to different social trends. This may be in the choice of demands, or more importantly, in the choice of ways forward to satisfy the demands. The women's movement, while being general, is therefore a carrier of class struggle. This is a universal fact, which also concerns the women's movement in Iran whose rights are obviously multiple in all socio-economic, political and civic fields.

The diversity of rights to be won for women leads some to think that there should be a division of tasks between social classes according to the right to be demanded, that the struggle for civil or political rights is solely the responsibility of the middle class, big and petty bourgeoisie, and that for socio-economic rights is the business of the working class.

However, it is wrong to believe that the fight against civic/political inequalities concerns the middle class. This is a misinterpretation of both the women's movement and the working-class movement.

The bourgeoisie, even in its best facet and in its ideal form, has not been able to wage the battle for demands for civil or political rights; because in a country like today's Iran it is not possible to realize these demands without affecting the dominant economic and social structures and social relations. The bourgeoisie, in order to better guarantee its interests, also plays an important role in the reappearance of pre-capitalist and patriarchal traditions.

Even in Western countries, many of these rights were acquired not by the bourgeoisie, but by the socialist workers' movement. One example is women's right to vote. The women's movement in 19th century Europe acted side by side with the socialist workers' movement. This current, which waged a daily struggle to impose on the bourgeoisie social measures in favour of the working strata, was able to lead the struggle of women for political freedoms. The greatest political (and bourgeois) right of women, the right to vote, was acquired when the socialist movement was at its peak by the social force that composed it.

And this is why it is not credible to attribute, as an example, to working-class women the struggle for creches in the factory, and to middle-class women the struggle against the veil or for the right to divorce. So, the real question in Iran is how to act to make equal civil rights real and meaningful for all women, not just a minority.

How can we talk about substantive equality within the family, when the right to divorce and custody of children only makes sense for women who are financially able to support themselves and their children, when the majority of women have no means of subsistence and are financially dependent on their husbands? How can we talk about equality between men and women on the labour market, without the woman being able to have the necessary training, when she has to do all the household chores, look after children and/or elderly parents in the absence of public institutions such as crèches, nurseries, retirement homes and so on?

It is not possible to approach women's rights by turning a blind eye to socio-economic structures. Thus, even women's civic demands find a favourable outcome only in the struggle to change this profit-hungry system, to one based on solidarity and cooperation and focused on the public interest, on the interests of the greatest number.

In a country like today's Iran, where large numbers of men and women live below the poverty line, it is unimaginable to achieve even individual rights and freedoms without defeating capitalist greed that seeks to extract maximum profit at the expense of the collective.

Thus, the liberals for whom the bourgeoisie remains untouchable are not able to satisfy the conditions required for the struggle concerning women's rights, including for (bourgeois) civil rights.

Another point is that the women's movement (like other social movements) is not necessarily always demanding, insofar as all its wishes or objectives are not to be satisfied by the adversary. We can talk about the example of the veil. The veils are receding or falling more and more, it is the de facto realization of a common will, despite the harsh repression exercised by the authorities.

It is in this sense that we must not seek the existence of the women's movement solely from the demands as demands to be satisfied. This is why despite the absence of such demands there can be a real movement whose parameter of recognition is the de facto realization of progress.

For a long time, the mainstream (known as "liberal feminism") presented the movement through demands on the legal status of women; while the women's movement exists beyond these demands in particular (still unsatisfied despite two decades of efforts), and any demand in general.

Of course, the women's movement must be sufficiently powerful to be able to demand in a concrete way one of its most important objectives, that of "equal pay for men and women": during the recent strikes (for two years) that affected national education in Iran, women were and still are at the forefront of the scene, and also this movement is concretely demanding insofar as it requires the authorities to take measures to guarantee the sustainability of public schools (where the catastrophic situation prevents a large number of students from the working classes from receiving free quality education).

And of course, there is the demand for an increase in wages, which are very insufficient. But so far there has been no demand for equal pay (in national education, as in other sectors, women are underpaid compared to men). But this will undoubtedly happen when the women's movement (and also the workers' movement) is more powerful. In any case, even in the absence of this primordial demand, we can speak of a women's movement, just by the effective presence of women in all existing social movements.

In summary: The women's movement exists and advances, just through the presence of women in all corners of society and in various social activities; in the choice of progressive norms; by the active presence of women in all protest and progressive social movements; and through the de facto achievement of certain objectives. It must seek to satisfy the various rights concerning all women. It is general and concerns all social classes, but it is the bearer of the class struggle insofar as each class social tendency could propose and put forward its priority objectives or its own plan of action in order to satisfy the common objectives; and necessarily the most appropriate choice or plan to meet the needs of the greatest number of women, will mark this movement and bring it to victory.

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from the [French transcript](#).*

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[1] The translation of talk given by Sara Salami, representative of Solidarité Socialiste avec les Travailleurs en Iran (SSTI-France) [Socialist Solidarity with Workers in Iran] during the "6 hours with the Iranian people" event organized by the "Centre d'Information Inter-Peuples" in Grenoble, France on 9 November 2019.