Breakout Session 3: 
Womens’ Rights and Wrongs

1) Elaheh ROSTAMI-POVEY
Women’s movement in Iran - Divided they can stand united

Abstract
In this paper, I want to examine how the contradictions inherent in the Islamic state are shifting the boundaries of conservative Islam, leading to the emergence of a potentially very important democracy movement where women play an important role. I will look at the internal dynamics of Iran since 1979. I argue that, the West has ignored the very real socio-economic achievements brought about by the revolution, preferring to view it solely as a religiously conservative phenomenon. Yet, to ignore this side of Iran’s development is a mistake, since it is such socio-economic transformation, which has brought about the powerful democracy movement in the country. In particular, the ‘religious new thinkers’ (noandishane dini) are a vital part of this movement and women play a crucial role in this movement, they are part of the women’s movement, the student movement and trade unionists. They are both inside and outside the system, and are often willing to ally with secularists, democratic nationalists and the left. Compared to other women’s groups they have far broader grassroots support. As a secular academic and activist, I believe the analysis of this part of the women’s movement is important for at least two reasons:

1. The encounters between religious tradition and secular modernity has often been analysed as two opposing poles. In the west, there is a tendency even amongst the academics to suggest that modernity is the exclusive property of western societies and western movements including the women’s movement. This dichotomization robs women’s contribution to modernity in Iran and other developing countries. For the majority of women and men in Iran Islam and modernity is compatible. It is through this mechanism that women of ‘religious new thinkers’ are struggling for women’s rights, human rights and democracy in Iran. In this context they refuse to be dragged into binary opposition between ‘modern / tradition and west / Islam’ and do not define their society and their movement as mere followers and imitators of western feminisms and western culture.

2. For many years, western academics and feminists ignored the women’s movement in Iran and portrayed women as passive victims of religion and men. In more recent years much attention has been given to two opposing poles in Iran, the secularists and the religious conservatives. This dichotomization which appeals to international audience ignores the women belonging to ‘religious new thinkers’ who have far greater grassroots support in Iran than the secularists and the religious conservatives. It is, therefore too simplistic to see the women’s movement in Iran through the lens of western culture and western feminism notion of emancipation and liberation.

The women’s movement in Iran is diverse. They, bravely and imaginatively, are finding their own ways of struggling for their gender rights. As diverse groups they are able to hang on to their diversity and at the same time stand together in fighting for their rights. Academics, feminists and international conferences have a responsibility to address this reality and should aim to close the gap between different women’s groups in Iran rather than to widen the gap between them.

Biography
Elaheh Rostami-Povey is a lecturer at the Department of Development Studies, Faculty of Law and Social Sciences, SOAS, University of London:
Her recent Publications are:
Books:
Forthcoming: Women, Socio-economic development and democracy in Iran, Ashgate
Forthcoming: Iran’s Influence: A Religio-Political State in its Region and in the World
2007 Afghan Women, Identity and Invasion, Zed Books
1999 Women, work and Islamism: Ideology and Resistance in Iran, Zed Books

Chapters in Books

Articles in Encyclopaedia
2007 Four entries in M. R. Fischbach et al (eds) Biographical Encyclopaedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa

Articles in refereed journals
2007, Gender, Agency and Identity, the Case of Afghan Women in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, Journal of Development Studies, Vol. 43, No. 2, 294-311
2007, Afghan Refugees in Iran, Pakistan, the U.K., and the U.S. and Life after Return: A Comparative Gender Analysis, Iranian Studies, Volume 40, number 2:

2) Azadeh MOAVENI
Brides and Apartments: How the Housing Market Has Transformed the Institution of Marriage

Abstract
The economic decline Iran has suffered since the 1979 revolution has involved relentless inflation, and the housing sector has proven itself especially prone to dramatic price increases. Iranians have not seen their incomes rise proportionally to the country's rate of inflation, and as a result most everyone apart from the upper middle-class and wealthy struggle considerably to afford rent and housing. Inevitably the difficulty involved in securing independent quarters has put marriage out of reach for many young people. As Iranians marry later and later, many not out of choice but of necessity, traditional mores that consider pre-marital sex a taboo are eroding. Recently state media reported that the inability to afford independent housing is now a leading cause of divorce in the Islamic republic. Conservatives in parliament, alarmed by this state of affairs, have proposed new measures to make marriage more accessible under such trying economic circumstances. They have put forth the suggestion of “semi-independent” marriage, an institution that would afford young people the social cover of marriage...
without many of the accompanying legal and financial responsibilities. Such schemes are testament to the scope of the social upheaval caused by an unstable economy and a young population unwilling to abide by traditional customs. To what extent has the two-income model of working marriage demanded by the modern economy replaced the traditional notion of marriage as a union contracted between a ready-to-provide suitor and a compliant female? Have economic realities forced young people into adopting more 'modern,' equitable attitudes toward marriage as a partnership, or have they simply reinforced cultural views that consider marriage a reflection of family status? I propose to examine the social transformations the post-revolutionary economy has wrought on the institution of marriage, and the accompanying shift in attitudes towards pre-marital sex amongst middle-class young people.

**Biography**
Azadeh Moaveni is the author of Lipstick Jihad and co-author, with Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, of Iran Awakening. She has lived and reported throughout the Middle East, and speaks both Farsi and Arabic fluently. Azadeh studied politics at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and received a Fulbright Fellowship to Egypt. As one of the few American correspondents allowed to work continuously in Iran since 1999, she has reported widely on youth culture, women's rights, and Islamic reform for Time, The New York Times Book Review, The Washington Post, and The Los Angeles Times. Currently a Time magazine contributing writer on Iran and the Middle East, she lives with her husband and son in London.

**3) Fariba DAVOODI MOHAJER TEHRANI**  
Strategies and tactics of one million signatures campaign

**Abstract**
In the last decade, the women's movement in Iran has been treading the same path that was opened in Iran's constitutional revolution a century ago towards suffrage, equal educational opportunities and full participation in the political and economic life of the society. Despite systemic obstacles and recurrent setbacks, Iranian women, imbued with unflagging courage and determination, have continued to move forward. They have constantly adjusted the strategies and tactics of their struggle to the evolving political and cultural conditions in Iran. It was during Mohammad Khatami's presidency that women's movement encountered a series of challenges and opportunities. Despite his expressions of sympathy for women's quest for equality, Khatami failed to take an unequivocally favorable stand in support of any of the major demands of Iranian women. This failure was due not only to the inflexibly patriarchal and discriminatory nature of Iran's constitutional structure but also to Mr. khatami's cavalier attitude towards Iranian women's ultimate aspirations.

By the end of his presidential term, disappointed Iranian women refusing to become passive victims of circumstances decided to further mobilize grass root support for the continuation of their campaign on an ever larger public arena. They hoped that increasing public pressure would either compel the government to respond positively to their demands or otherwise elevate Iranian women's discontent to the most visible and critical of Iran's social and political problems. A number of developments during Khatami's presidency had in fact provided a number of opportunities for accelerating the women's movement forward. Among these developments one may count:

The creation a large number of non-governmental organizations which, despite financial and logistical impediments, managed to advocate and publicize women's long-standing concerns and demands;
Publication of a number of newspapers whose editorial and reportorial staff consisted mostly in young women. These publications could therefore, reflect and focus on women's points of view and report extensively on their problems and needs.

The number of female students in Iranian universities reached 63% of the total student body; a trend that impacted both the society at large and familial structure at a time when the governmental institutions grew more authoritarian.

Many of student organizations in the universities expressed their support for women’s demands and invited women activists, particularly those whose husbands were languishing in the regime’s prisons, to air their grievances in university campuses and meeting halls;

The number of books and movies on feminist topics reached new heights.

Many web logs and internet sites began to debate women’s issues freely, albeit temporarily.

A series of discussions by a group of Iranian women resulted in the draft of a report on the status of Iranian women which was submitted to the Iranian Commission of Rights of Women. The discussions, which covered 12 problematic aspects of women’s lives in Iran, led to further understanding and solidarity between members of the group.

Some of Iran’s women activists were allowed to participate in a number of international conferences, some of which offered training workshops on women’s rights. Through such gatherings, Iranian participants became more acutely aware of women’s movements in other parts of the world. The exposure to the international discourse on women’s rights emboldened Iranian women to further expand the list of their demands from Iranian political leaders.

Awarding of the Nobel peace prize to Shirin Ebadi created another opportunity for Iranian women to solidify their ranks and provided them with another impetus for organizational planning.

A few reformist and pro Khatami Muslim women activists who were appointed to mid level government positions began to air women’s demands within their own political groupings and thus familiarize their Muslim male colleagues with such demands.

After election of Ahmadinedjad to the presidency of the Islamic republic of Iran, the leaders of Women Solidarity began to divine a new strategy that would better answer such questions as: How the cost of the campaign could be lowered? How the movement could better mobilize the masses and reach new horizons? What are the most effective means to sensitize not only the public, but also the regime’s leaders about the necessity and importance of changing the unjust and discriminatory laws that adversely affect women’s lives in Iran?

Establishment of one million signatures campaign
Following a number of meetings, the campaign of One Million Signatures was publicly launched on August 27th 2006(?). More than fifty women activists drafted three documents to form a preliminary covenant defining the reasons for, and objectives of, the Campaign. The first document, to be signed by individual supporters, contains the main statement of the Campaign. The second pertains to the objectives of the Campaign and the duties of its executive committees. Finally, the third document consists of booklets titled “The Impact of the Legal Order on Women’s Lives.” These booklets describe the current discriminatory laws and regulations that will be further explained to the signatories by the Campaign volunteers. These volunteers, it must be emphasized, go through training sessions before they start collecting signatures. These inter-connected documents bind the activists together and provide the necessary guidelines for the Campaign to move forward and reach its goal incrementally. Once a million signatures are collected, a petition for the elimination of discriminatory laws would be
submitted to the Islamic Consultative Assembly. In this process, however, the Campaign itself will have evolved into an unstoppable movement.

**Biography**
She has got her Master degree in Political Science. She was granted awards of Hellman/Hammett Grant from Human Rights Watch (2007), 2007 Human Rights Award; Human Rights First annual award (October 15 2007 and Fellowship, Frontline Defenders (Dublin, Ireland).

She has worked as a journalist and editors. She has published several papers in different newspapers including Sepideh, Dirouz Emrouz, and Farda; Eghbal, Yas-e Now newspaper; and manager of Public Relations of Khordad, and Fath, and Hambastegi newspapers. Currently serve as the editor of the civil society section of Hayat-e-No newspaper. She has written over a hundred articles appearing in numerous reformist newspapers, magazines, and newsletters in Iran that focus on a feminist approach regarding women's issues, democracy and civil society, children's rights, women’s and student's movement in Iran, criticizing non-democratic behaviors and human rights abuses, and relations including Gozzar, Rooz and Gooya websites. She has given several speeches in seminars and conferences held in Iran she participated in conferences, workshops and forums in San Jose, California, Washington DC, University of Berkleay, University of California and Chicago in USA as well as other countries; in Ireland, Belgium, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Germany.

She has worked as Technical Officer Center for Academic Partnerships Academy for Educational Development and as a fellowship for The National Endowment for Democracy (NED).