

## **Breakout Session 3: Women's Activism**

### **1) Benjamin STACHURSKY and Marcus MICHAELSEN (Net)working for Change: Women's Movement the Iranian Way**

#### **Abstract**

During the 1990s, NGOs emerged as a new form of civil society organisation in many countries of the Middle East. International organisations such as the UN as well as new development strategies played a central role in fostering the formation of these new actors, not least in the field of women's empowerment. However, the 'NGOisation' of indigenous women's movements has increasingly come under critical scrutiny over the past years. Today, the emergence of strongly transnationalised and professionalised advocacy organisations mostly financed through international donors has been recognised to offer not only chances but also serious challenges to the legitimacy and outreach of women's movements. The elitist character of NGOs, their lack of linkages to the grassroots level and their concentration in capital cities are frequently perceived as obstacles to the development of a broad movement and, ultimately, to affecting deeper social change.

Likewise, in Iran NGOs formed as new expressions of the women's movement. Especially under the government of Khatami the promotion of civil society became a key objective. The governmental support can, however, be considered as one of the reasons why these new social actors have been less influenced by international dynamics than their counterparts in other countries of the region. In other words, the Iranian women's movement shows strongly 'home-grown' characteristics and is less oriented towards a transnationalisation of its activities. At the same time, it remains vulnerable to political fluctuation. With Ahmadinejad taking office, the official support for NGOs has not only been suspended, but civil society actors have also become a target of increasing state repression.

Against this background, the Internet has gained increasing significance for the activities of the women's movement. While websites and blogs have reinforced the networking between activists, several campaigns were successfully organised and coordinated through the Internet in recent years. In this regard, the new media is not just a substitute for other means of communication obstructed by regime restrictions. It rather allows for innovative forms of organisation, mobilisation and activism. Thereby, the Internet also seems to strengthen the movement's open and network-oriented character.

This paper analyses these recent developments of the Iranian women's movement and the central influencing factors. State repression and other restrictions have certainly forced the women's movement to adapt for the sake of pragmatism. Nonetheless, it is argued that these challenges may also have had positive effects. In fact, the development of a horizontally structured movement of young activists, which is based on voluntary participation and cross-linked over the whole country, offers great potential for the improvement of the legal and social status of Iranian women. It, furthermore, fosters a deep, socially sustained transformation in this area. Here, the impact of new modes of communication and publication has strongly shaped the current landscape of civil society activism in this field. In view of the critical debate on the NGOisation of women's movements in the Middle East, the 'Iranian way' can be seen to have a wider relevance for activists in the region.

#### **Biography**

## 2) Azar MAJEDI New roles for women

### Abstract

Iran has been among the most debated countries in the world. It presents a dilemma for many political analysts and academics. It seems to be a land of paradox. The situation of women in Iran is perhaps the most controversial socio-political and cultural issue. The legal status of women and their official image contradict their de facto situation. From the legal code and the image portrayed by the leaders of Islamic regime, one is to expect women to be much more conservative, traditional and subdued. However, a brief contact with the country, viewing its cinema, following the news or looking at the women's pictures on the street, one is to discover a totally different woman. Women's rights movement in Iran is the most vibrant women's movement not only in the Middle East, but in the world. I believe that this contradiction could be explained mainly by this fact.

The situation of women has definitely changed in the past thirty years. However, due to the disparity between the official image of women and young women's aspirations, there is no defined role for women.

Different socio-political movements have different visions as to what women's role should be in the society. Besides the official Islamic vision, there are three different main socio-political movements in Iran.

1. National-Islamic movements, which have the most leverage for open activity in the society.
2. Pro-western nationalism, which more or less represents the old regime's ideas, values and ideology. This movement does not represent an independent women's movement at present.
3. The radical-socialist movement which is totally banned inside the country, but its ideas and aspirations are quite visible in the society, particularly among the young generation.
4. To try and define women's new roles in Iran, one must expound these main movements, their past, their present, their aspirations and political affiliations. One must also look at each movement's attraction to the young generation.
5. To try and explain the disparity between the official image and status of women with the de facto status and women's aspirations, one must dwell on Iran's contemporary history. The social changes in the country prior to the revolution, why and how the revolution was formed and the main socio-political trends under the Islamic regime must be analysed.

In this paper, I will try to expound on these points.

### Biography

I am a writer and women's rights activist. I am the president of Organisation for Women's Liberation [www.womensliberation.net](http://www.womensliberation.net), an executive member of European Feminist Initiative (A European feminist Organisation) [www.ife-efi.org](http://www.ife-efi.org) and the editor of Medusa, a journal dealing with women's issues. I was present in Iran at the time of the revolution and took part in the organisation of most major women's protests and events. I lived in Iran until 1984, two years in Kurdistan, where I was active in changing the very backward situation of women. I have been living in Europe since 1984.

### Education

Two bachelor degrees; one in French Literature and History the other in Geography and International Development.

### Publications

A book entitled Women's Rights vs Political Islam.

Numerous articles in Farsi, English and French on women's rights, secularism, Socio-political situation in Iran and other political issues. Some of these articles can be accessed by visiting the OWL's website, or websites mentioned below. Many of my articles have been translated into French, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, Arabic, Polish and Greek. Farsi ones have been published in Iranian journals published abroad. The English and French ones have been published in the International Humanist Journal, New Humanist Magazine, Free Thinker, pro choix, Medusa, OWL's journal, one in Three Women, Informacion, a Danish paper, etc. Many of my writings are posted on different international websites: [www.butterfliesandwheels.com](http://www.butterfliesandwheels.com), [www.richarddawkins.net](http://www.richarddawkins.net), [www.zmagazine.net](http://www.zmagazine.net), [www.prochoix.org](http://www.prochoix.org), [www.faithfreedom.com](http://www.faithfreedom.com) and Centre for Inquiry.

My writings have also been quoted in different books and reports on the Women's situation and movement in Iran, gender apartheid, e.g. Leaving Islam by Ibn Warra.

#### In media

I have been interviewed on Women's situation in Iran and Middle East, Islam and women's rights, and on the situation in Iran by various international media: International Herald Tribune, Spiegel on line, Gothenburg Posten and some other Scandinavian papers; BBC world, radio4 Asian net work, BBC5, Scotland, More 4 News TV, and appeared on 'It's My Life' an ITV programme, on the issue of free speech, and a BBC documentary on Shirin Ebadi. On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Iranian revolution I was interviewed by BBC Radio 4, Flight from Tehran and BBC World, World Today.

I have also worked as a producer and a presenter in a satellite television, both in Farsi and English.

I have participated in many international conferences and have organised several myself.

#### Awards

I have been nominated for the Emma Humphrey memorial award 2007 and secularist of the year award 2008. I have been short listed for the Sheila McKechnie award 2008 by The Sheila McKechnie Foundation

#### Visiting lecturer

At Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law. RWI is an independent academic institute based in Lund, Sweden, ([www.rwi.lu.se](http://www.rwi.lu.se)) in November 2008. The topics of my lecture were women's empowerment in MENA region, Women's Political Participation and Development of Human Rights Instruments in MENA-region

[www.azarmajedi.com](http://www.azarmajedi.com)

[www.m-hekmat.com](http://www.m-hekmat.com)

[www.azadizan.com](http://www.azadizan.com)

[www.for-abetterworld.com](http://www.for-abetterworld.com)

[www.againstgenderapartheid.com](http://www.againstgenderapartheid.com)

### **3) Hamid SHESHJAVANI**

**Family Life and Working Women: A Descriptive Analysis of Spousal Conflict in The Case of Iranian working mothers in the last two decades**

#### Abstract

### **Biography**

Hamid sheshjavani was born in 1975 in Esfahan, He is a translator and social researcher in the Sociosurvey Researching center (SSR). He is a member of Iranian sociology association (ISA). He currently works in Social Entrepreneurship, Sociology of development and Women's issues. He was previously translator of Media Researching Center in Tehran. Sheshjavani completed his MA in sociology from Payamenoor University in 2006 with a dissertation on the women's problem in Iran.

Some of his translation from English include: Social Semiotics (2004), Communication Theories (2005), Social Capital and Entrepreneurship (2006) and Why are Artists Poor (2007) and social Entrepreneurship (2008).

He was also wrote some essay and article about women's issues in Magazines and websites. He is already working on a research about Economy of Art and Cultural Policy.