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U.S. “maximum pressure” on Iran hurts the women it claims to help

To help justify its coercive measures against the Islamic Republic, Washington often evokes Iranian women’s struggles for inclusion and equality. But evidence from today’s Iran shows that U.S. policies are instead contributing to holding women back.

By Azadeh Moaveni & Ali Vaez

<https://bit.ly/3aJ1U0W> – On 21 May 2018, less than two weeks after the U.S. withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo launched Washington’s “New Iran Strategy” before an audience at the Heritage Foundation. In his remarks, he insisted that Iranian women’s long struggle for inclusion and equality matters dearly to Washington. As if to prove the point, the U.S. State Department’s social media feeds since that day have interspersed announcements of new choking sanctions with twinkling reminders of Iranian women’s potential (“Congratulations to Iranian-American and new #NASA Astronaut Jasmin Moghbeli!”). In January 2020, the State Department released a two-minute video on the history of Iranian women’s rights. To a melody of maudlin piano and soaring strings, the video sweeps viewers past scenes of bare-headed women in silk blouses, wistfully recalling an era when Iran’s women purportedly “enjoyed freedom and equal opportunity”, before shifting to dark footage from after the 1979 revolution, when “women’s rights in #Iran...regressed”. No Iranian woman from either era actually speaks in the video, about either the Shah’s regime or the Islamic Republic. But the final caption promises nevertheless: “The women of the U.S. will stand with the women of Iran”.

Washington’s evocation of Iranian women and their aspirations has become a feature of its marketing for “maximum pressure” – the campaign of economic coercion aimed at precipitating Iranian capitulation to U.S. demands or regime collapse. The marketing is stunning for its hypocrisy, focused as it is on the plight of Iranian women even as it says nothing about the injustices women face at the hands of Middle Eastern governments allied with the U.S. Moreover, as Washington has widened its claim that the Islamic Republic disallows any space for women, it has grown more detached from reality. One tweet this past December maintained that the Iranian regime denies women the opportunity to “participate in public life” –

during a month when Iranian female directors and actors were shining at the Tehran film festival. Women have long been engaged in almost every aspect of Iranian public life from politics to political activism and from diplomacy to flying planes and driving heavy trucks. But perhaps the most regrettable feature of this U.S. policy spotlighting the suppression of Iranian women's rights is that it has damaged the activism and independence of the very women it claims to support.

Of course, and despite women's prominence in public life, the Islamic Republic has a long and dismal record of keeping Iranian women second-class citizens in terms of civil and personal rights. The surge of women into higher education and the work force that accompanied the 1979 revolution galvanised women to demand more legal and social equality, not less. Yet the state has, for decades, defended a status quo of discriminatory laws like mandatory hijab. It was only in December 2019, under international pressure, that Iran's Football Federation committed to allowing women to attend matches in the domestic club league. Restrictions on women's public conduct and appearance have sown increasing resentment and alienation, especially among millennial women and girls, who are less inclined than their elders to view the relaxation of rules as sufficient progress. As one 19-year-old sports champion put it: "My generation wants [dress codes] removed. We compare ourselves to the rest of the world, where everyone is modernising and evolving, and we find this strictness ridiculous".

For much of the past two decades, the Iranian women's movement has encompassed diverse strands of activism: there have been radical and gradualist wings, single-issue campaigns seeking an end to mandatory hijab or access to sports stadiums, drives

to reform divorce and domestic violence laws, and grassroots efforts aimed at mobilising rural and working-class women behind such legal changes. On occasion, these different currents have brought their particular struggles into the streets and endured crackdowns, before shifting course. The authorities have never smiled upon women's activism, and every subset of the women's movement, from state-affiliated religious feminists to secular-minded organisers, has encountered some level of official hostility and obstruction. The authorities' intolerance for women's organising has grown so severe in recent years that most of the movement's luminaries are now in prison, in exile abroad or in a self-imposed state of quiescence. But the state's response has not been limited to repression. At times, it has grudgingly tolerated – and even conceded to – women's demands as a reality with powerful electoral implications. Women's turnout has been critical to presidential wins by more moderate candidates since the late 1990s, and politicians now regularly emphasise women's concerns when courting voters.

The Trump administration is trying to appropriate the Iranian women's cause. Whether they are skirmishing with authorities in anti-hijab street confrontations, joining labour protests, such as last year's May Day demonstrations, or agitating against the government's November hike in fuel prices, women have been active in airing specific grievances. Most demonstrators have pointedly demanded an end to hijab laws, but they have received loud support – whether solicited or not – from anti-regime voices in Washington and among certain Iranian opposition figures outside the country, whose objective is toppling the regime. If this external pressure was supposed to help, there is little evidence that it achieved its goal. Iran's security apparatus, under siege and suspicious of citizens' real or imagined links with the outside world, has over the past year doled out some of the

severest sentences for women activists in recent memory.

In the 2000s and 2010s, Iranian women waged sophisticated and far-ranging battles against both discriminatory laws and the patriarchal culture, shared by men and women alike, from which those laws partly emanate. But in recent months, all those intense and public rows among women, between generations of activists with varying priorities, over whether the most suitable terrain was the family living room, one's personal relationship or the public street corner, have fallen eerily silent. Internal debate among women activists in Iran now is largely about the frightening, pervasive threats to the country's security and well-being.

A sanctions campaign as broad and blunt as that which the U.S. has built up is bound to have inadvertent consequences for the target population. As the economy reels from sanctions, women entrepreneurs, particularly those in cash-based or service industries, have been particularly hard-hit. The 2010s saw a flourishing of women-owned businesses, with successes piling up in sectors women found themselves able to enter – from online clothing sales to cafés and restaurants. Those sectors might have appealed to women because they could better control their hours and workload, sidestep workplace exploitation or harassment, or discover opportunities for real economic advancement.

But as the Iranian currency began to sink in value in the summer of 2018, first in response to the Trump administration withdrawing from the nuclear deal, and then more precipitously, in anticipation of increasingly severe sanctions, sometimes falling by double digits in a single day, families coped by cutting back on leisure spending, on

everything from clothes to hair salons to eating out. Small shops and retailers saw their revenue drop, while their rents skyrocketed. “Many women I know, often younger women who used to be activists or journalists and had turned to running cafés, are now going out of business”, said Sussan Tahmasebi, a long-time civil society activist who retains close ties with women counterparts in Iran. “They’re not just losing economically, but losing that liberating force of being able to be financially independent”.

Sanctions have also forced tens of foreign firms to close shop and lay off Iranian workers. These companies tended to offer forward-thinking and empowering workspaces for women, setting high standards – everything from attractive salaries to more professional management and expected conduct – that Iranian companies would have to match. Some organised anti-sexual harassment training for employees, to bring them in line with minimal codes of conduct in European firms. Sanctions halted that progress.

The record thus appears clear: by imposing stifling sanctions, the Trump administration has deprived Iranian women of economic empowerment and the social independence that can accompany it; by politicising the women’s movement in the service of its own goals, it has exposed them to graver danger; and by zeroing in on women’s rights in Iran while it ignores them elsewhere in the Middle East, it has highlighted its own insincerity. The monumental challenges that Iranian women face in fighting their government’s discriminatory laws and repressive policies are difficult enough without the debilitating impact of sanctions. If they could collectively send a message to Washington, they might draw from the words of the thirteenth-century Persian poet, Sa’adi, who said: “I do not expect any favours from you. Just do no harm”.

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