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Iran's #MeToo moment: Women's tweets highlight alleged sexual abuse, rape by prominent figures

By Golnaz Esfandiari

RFE/RL (25.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/32EJNGV> - For 14 years, former Iranian journalist Sara Omatali kept quiet about the time she says a prominent painter sexually assaulted her.

Last week, the U.S.-based educator broke her silence on Twitter, detailing the alleged abuse that took place in the summer of 2006.

Omatali is one of many Iranian women who have in recent days taken to social media to tell their stories of sexual harassment and rape, breaking years of silence about an issue that remains taboo and is often swept under the rug in Iran.

Omatali said she had decided to interview the painter about an exhibition at the National Museum in Tehran. He insisted that she came to his office first, saying they would go to the exhibition together. After hesitating, she went to his office to find him naked under a brown cloak.

He then assaulted her, she said.

"He held me tightly, squeezing my body and trying to kiss my lips; I struggled as hard as I could to get rid of him," she wrote on Twitter.

Omatali managed to escape into the street. The painter later came out and acted as if nothing had happened.

"He came toward me and said: 'Shall we?'"

"It was as if I had no will of my own. I went," Omatali said, adding that she still becomes full of "hatred, fear, and helplessness" when she recalls that day.

Spotlight on abuse

The outpouring of accounts about alleged sexual abuse, rape, and unwanted sexual advances and the number of women who have joined the movement, some anonymously, appears to be unprecedented in Iran, leading to comparisons with the global #metoo movement that has occurred around the world in recent years and putting a spotlight on such abuse.

One woman said she was raped by a friend after she visited him at his apartment. She had a glass of wine and woke up the next morning in his bed, naked, she said.

Others came forward claiming they had been raped by the same man, accusing him of drugging them beforehand.

Tehran police chief Hossein Rahimi said on August 25 that the man identified by the initials "KE" had been arrested after several women said they were raped by him.

Several others accused a known visual artist, as well as a popular writer, while at least one spoke of past sexual misconduct by a prominent filmmaker.

Some named their abusers publicly, others alluded to their identities. Several men also joined the campaign, tweeting about their experience with sexual abuse.

Fashion photographer Reihaneh Taravati said she had been sexually harassed by "one of the pioneers of Iranian photography" when she was 19, while artist Leva Zand wrote how her friend had been raped by a man whom she described as a well-known, New York-based, Iranian human rights activist.

At least one woman recounted how she sought legal action against her perpetrator that resulted in the punishment of her offender.

Several lawyers offered tips and legal advice to Iranian women who face discriminatory Islamic laws enforced following the 1979 Islamic Revolution that often favor men.

The global #metoo movement led to the downfall of a number of prominent figures, including the famous Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein, who is now in prison in New York.

The Iranian #metoo movement, which has resulted at this time in the arrest of one alleged rapist, appears to have empowered abuse survivors who had remained silent for years and, in some cases, blamed themselves for the predatory behavior of their abusers.

Omatali told RFE/RL she decided to publicize her alleged sexual harassment after reading some of the anonymous accounts of abuse that have been posted on social media in the past two weeks.

"I thought to myself, 'you're in the United States and have more freedom and protection than those in Iran to raise the issue publicly, why are you silent?'"

"I didn't find an answer that would satisfy me, and so despite the pressure and anxiety I knew I would face, I decided to write about my experience, hoping that it would be a starting point for the publicizing of similar incidents," Omatali said.

Absence of education

She expressed hope that the ongoing campaign will lead to increased awareness among people about the problems of sexual abuse and harassment.

"In the absence of systematic education about sexual issues in Iran, this group movement improves the atmosphere for a public discussion and creates a precious opportunity for education," Omatali said.

Sexual abuse is believed to be widespread in Iranian society, where women often complain about being sexually harassed on the streets in the form of catcalling and groping.

Many women have also recounted in past days about being sexually assaulted at work while having no choice than to stay in contact with the offender, who is quite often the boss or a colleague.

Tehran-based sociologist Saeed Madani told RFE/RL's Radio Farda that in Iran, like other countries, many victims of sexual abuse and rape are reluctant to speak out.

"They aren't usually inclined to seek legal action, therefore the number of cases that are referred to the [authorities] is very limited and those very limited cases are not publicized," he said.

Madani referred to rape figures reported by the media as "the tip of the iceberg," saying the majority of the cases are not being reported.

"One report said that the highest incidents of rape are in Tehran, with about 1,600 sexual crimes being registered annually, but it is estimated that some 80 percent of rape cases are not being reported," he said.

One reason is the taboo surrounding the issue while victim blaming is also preventing women from coming forward.

"In a patriarchal society, it is assumed primarily that the woman has done something wrong," Madani said.

Veteran women's rights advocate Susan Tahmasebi told RFE/RL that the current movement against sexual abuse and rape is likely to encourage more survivors of abuse to seek legal action.

"Already we see that the recounting of these stories has brought about change," Tahmasebi said. "Besides raising awareness among women survivors of rape and sexual assault, sending them the message that they are not to blame and that they will be safe in coming forward."

"It tells men that they can no longer continue their violent behavior against women with full impunity," she added. "At least in the eyes of the community they will lose face and this has already happened in the case of some high-profile men."

Iran implements law allowing women to pass their nationality to their children

The former laws of the Islamic Republic only allowed men to pass nationality.

By Somayeh Malekian

ABC News (25.06.2020) - <https://abcn.ws/3ieXaEL> - Writing down her dreams in her diary notebook was the first thing Samaneh, a 16-year-old undocumented Iranian-Bengali, did after she learned she might officially get an Iranian ID.

"My daughter was over the moon when I told her the law was changed and she could get Shenanameh [an Iranian official ID card] through me. All she wants is to go to school and to the gym," Samaneh's mother told ABC News. She, like others interviewed in the story, did not want her name and her daughter's full name mentioned for personal reasons.

Samaneh is one of about one million undocumented children born to Iranian mothers and non-Iranian fathers who have had many challenges in accessing education, medical and other services because they were not recognized as Iranian nationals.

The former laws of the Islamic Republic only allowed men to pass nationality, so children of foreign national fathers and Iranian women were not considered Iranian. But, with the new law which will go into effect in two weeks, women will confer their nationality to their children like men, the spokesman of the government Ali Rabiei said, according to the Islamic Republic News Agency.

Most of the men with foreign nationalities who marry Iranian women are refugees from Iran's neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, Fatemeh Ashrafi, head of HAMI, an association for protection of refugee women and children, told ABC News.

"More than 100,000 Iranian women are married to [foreign men], mostly from neighboring countries," Ashrafi said.

"I hope the news is true," said Khaleghzadeh, a mother of five undocumented children to an Afghan father who still cannot believe the long ordeal of her children is over.

"If my children get Iranian IDs, they can go to work without being constantly worried about getting arrested and deported to Afghanistan," she added.

As Ashrafi said, the law is as much about women's rights as it is about refugees and their children. "This law helps women regain an important part of their rights," she said.

"I can't forget how terribly I was shocked when after my marriage I realized my children could not get Iranian ID despite the fact that I was Iranian," Samaneh's mother said. "I felt I wasn't a full person."

"I am happy that I can get my name registered at state schools like my other friends and can rejoin the kabaddi team," Samaneh said. She was a member of the kabaddi team at

the gym in her neighborhood, but could not stay with the team after they made it to the next round of the city champion league, as she was undocumented.

"Lack of access to free education or work permission is not the only problem my children have, they are tired of being constantly humiliated for having an Afghan father," Khaleghzadeh said. "Now, they are happy that they can be recognized as Iranian."

The pain of being seen as inferior is what many Afghans and children of Afghan refugees complain about in Iran.

"One of the toughest things I have to deal with on a daily basis is hiding the nationality of my father. People would think of me as a lesser person if they realized my dad was Bengali," Samaneh said.

However, Ashrafi believes that the social discrimination against non-Iranians has historical reasons and is not a problem that can be solved merely by changing a law. "It is a deeper issue that needs a rather long-term cultural and social approach. This law is not going to help the wrong with that social damage," she said.

Khaleghzadeh has a 25-year-old undocumented pregnant daughter, also married to an undocumented Afghan refugee, who does not have a work permit in Iran. "If she can get my Iranian nationality, then she can pass it to her baby, too," she said. "At least they can get the cash subsidies from the government for the times her husband does not work," she added.

Iran distributes monthly cash subsidies of about \$2.50 per person. The humble amount still means a lot to families with no income in destitute areas of the country including border provinces like Sistan and Baluchistan, home to many families with Iranian mothers and Afghan refugee fathers.

Over a million Afghan refugees are officially registered in Iran. The number of undocumented Afghans is about 2.5 million, the government spokesperson said.

"Many of such marriages are a result of the poverty of families of these women in border provinces. Around 80% of women married to refugees in Iran are illiterate or barely literate and live in the slums. They are hardly aware of their rights, so they marry refugees sometimes for a small sum of money that is not inconsiderable for these families," Ashrafi said.

Although the implementation of the new law is the last hope of many families, experts believe it may cause problems as it contains some contradictions and loopholes.

"This bill is inconsistent with the Constitution, at some points. One of them is the ambiguity of the new regulations about dual nationals," Ashrafi said.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran does not recognize dual nationality. It has left some families in obscurity whose children have already been granted their fathers' nationality.

"Both of my daughters have Iraqi ID," said Kolsum, an Iranian woman who lives with her Iraqi husband and her daughters in Baghdad. She is not sure if her daughters are eligible to get Iranian ID as they already are recognized as Iraqi nationals.

"I know the problem with dual nationality in Iran's constitution, but I really like my daughters to get Shenanameh, because it saves all the visa hassle we have at the border every time we want to visit my family in Iran," she said.

Shocking charges against jailed women's rights activists, who must be released amid second COVID-19 peak

GCHR (22.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2VyzBgz> - The world has been facing a pandemic that left prisoners including human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience very vulnerable among other populations in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries. Since the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly in March 2020, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) has been calling for the authorities in the region to release all prisoners who pose no risk to society. GCHR is further concerned by a new trend in Iran of adding sentences to already imprisoned women human rights defenders, leaving them ineligible for furlough during the pandemic.

In Iran, the COVID-19 crisis has quickly taken a second peak as the country's health infrastructure has been too precarious after years of sanctions, corruption, and the state's obstinacy towards its international commitments. The Iranian authorities have put the country under strict laws and practices that are built on discrimination, segregation and proscription of women's rights, while committing mass human rights violations inside and outside the country.

Those who dare to speak against such human rights violations are persecuted and prosecuted with inane and lengthy sentences and become victims of a legal system that flaunts international standards of law. Freedom of expression and assembly in pursuit of gender equality are often regarded as acts against "national security," "propaganda against the state," "encouraging and providing for moral corruption and prostitution" and "insulting the sacred."

In mid-March 2020, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a 37-year-old British-Iranian citizen, who has been in prison since 2016 when she was sentenced for five years, was released temporarily from Evin prison in Tehran. While here release has been extended, she remains required to wear an ankle bracelet and not move more than 300 metres from her parents' home. Her release came following the serious threat of the coronavirus spreading through Iran's prison system. Zaghari-Ratcliffe went on a water-only hunger strike to protest her continued imprisonment last year, when she was held in solitary confinement for over a month, according to her family.

In light of the COVID-19 risk, the Iranian judiciary said it had so far released 85,000 prisoners, half of whom were political prisoners. Yet, it is still unknown what proportion of women human rights defenders and activists is among those who have been released, or even those who are still in prison.

Among those who remain in prison is journalist and human rights defender Narges Mohammadi, the spokeswoman for the Centre for Human Rights Defenders in Iran, who has been imprisoned since 2015, serving a combined 16-year prison sentence. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison for establishing the Step by Step to Stop Death Penalty group (also known as LEGAM), as well as five years for "gathering and colluding with intent to harm national security," and one year for "spreading propaganda against the system." She was sentenced on 17 May 2016 and her sentence was upheld on 28 September 2016. According to the law, she must serve the longest sentence, namely the 10-year sentence. She has been held in Evin prison since 05 May 2015, already serving a previous six-year sentence.

In a ludicrous move that seems all the more cruel considering the COVID-19 threat, Mohammadi is facing new charges, even while in prison, which was revealed in an open

letter recently sent by her bother to the Iranian authorities. Mehdi Mohammadi, exiled in Norway, explained in his letter that his sister had serious health problems but “was not allowed out of prison to see a doctor.” In May 2020, human rights groups reported that Mohammadi was facing up to five years more in prison and 74 lashes for various charges including “collusion against the regime,” “propaganda against the regime” and the crime of “insult”.

Also in June 2020, imprisoned woman human rights defender Atena Daemi, who is serving seven years in prison, was charged with “disturbing order” after being accused of chanting anti-government slogans on the anniversary of Iran’s 1979 revolution. She was sentenced to five years in prison in 2016 and in September 2019, a court added two years and one month to her sentence for “insulting” and “disseminating anti-government propaganda” after she wrote an open letter from prison criticising the execution of political prisoners. Daemi’s family says the new charges meant she would no longer be eligible for furlough on 04 July 2020 under the law, nor could she be freed under the current furloughs being offered during the pandemic.

On 1 June 2020, women’s rights activist Saba Kord Afshari was sentenced to 15 years in prison sentence by an appeals court after having been acquitted on 17 March 2020 by the Evin Prosecutor's Office. She was sentenced for “promoting corruption and prostitution through appearing without a headscarf in public,” for her role in the White Wednesday protest movement against mandatory veiling. Kord Afshari is already serving a nine-year sentence. She’s also ineligible for a furlough during the pandemic.

In April 2020, United Nations human rights experts called on Iran to expand its temporary release of thousands of detainees to include prisoners of conscience and dual and foreign nationals who are still behind bars despite the serious risk of being infected with COVID-19, following concerns raised from inside the country.

Iranian activists’ families have raised concerns over the ill-treatment, the lack of proper hygiene and the inadequate measures taken by the authorities to adapt and mitigate the circumstances linked to the spread of the coronavirus in the Iranian prisons.

GCHR calls on the Iranian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all women’s rights defenders detained for peacefully practicing their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and calling for gender equality. This is all the more pressing due to the health risks related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Iran's Rohani calls for stricter laws on 'honor killings' after beheading of 13-year-old girl

RFE/RL's Radio Farda (27.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3czVW2G> - Iranian President Hassan Rohani has called for harsher laws to tackle so-called "honor killings" after the particularly shocking slaying of a teenage girl, allegedly by her father, prompted a nationwide outcry.

Rohani on May 27 pushed for the speedy adoption of relevant bills, some which have apparently circulated for years among various Iranian decision-making bodies without any tangible results.

The call comes after 13-year-old Romina Ashrafi was killed last week in Hovigh, some 320 kilometers northwest of Tehran.

Local media reported that the teenager was beheaded while she slept by her father, who used a farming sickle.

The father, Reza Ashrafi, was said to be enraged after Romina fled the family home to marry a 35-year-old man she loved.

Both of their families complained to the authorities, and security forces detained Romina and her boyfriend, Bahamn Khavari, following a five-day hunt.

Although Romina reportedly told police she would be in danger at home and feared for her life, the girl was handed over to her father as required by Iranian laws.

After the killing, the father allegedly turned himself in to police and confessed to the crime.

Hovigh district Governor Kazem Razmi said the man was in custody, charged with murder. He said the investigation into the case was still under way.

Meanwhile, the vice president for women's affairs, Masoumeh Ebtekar, was quoted as announcing a "special order" from Rohani to investigate the killing.

Under current law, her father faces a prison sentence of up to 10 years if convicted.

According to the Islamic Penal Code, he was Romina's "guardian," so he is exempt from "retaliation in kind," meaning the death penalty in this case.

Iranian media occasionally report on cases related to honor killings carried out by relatives, usually male family members, when the actions of women and girls are perceived as violating conservative traditions on love, marriage, and public behavior. It is not known how many women and girls die from such killings.

In 2014, a Tehran police official reported that 20 percent of all murders in the country were "honor" killings.

Romina's boyfriend apparently faces no penalty since under Iran's laws, girls can marry after the age of 13, though the average age of marriage for Iranian women is 23.

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

International Crisis Group (06.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3a11U0W> - 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".

Iran's sole female Olympic medalist says she's defected

By Vasco Cotovio

CNN (12.01.2020) - <https://cnn.it/2Re9pVt> - Iran's sole female Olympic medalist, Kimia Alizadeh, has announced that she's permanently left her country for Europe.

"Let me start with a greeting, a farewell or condolences," the 21-year-old wrote in an Instagram post explaining why she was defecting. "I am one of the millions of oppressed women in Iran who they have been playing with for years."

Alizadeh became the first Iranian woman to win an Olympic medal after claiming bronze in the 57kg category of Taekwondo at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Affectionately known in Iran as "The Tsunami," Alizadeh announced she was leaving her birth country amid searing criticism of the regime in Tehran.

"They took me wherever they wanted. I wore whatever they said. Every sentence they ordered me to say, I repeated. Whenever they saw fit, they exploited me," she wrote, adding that credit for her success always went to those in charge.

"I wasn't important to them. None of us mattered to them, we were tools," Alizadeh added, explaining that while the regime celebrated her medals, it criticized the sport she had chosen: "The virtue of a woman is not to stretch her legs!"

Reports of her defection first surfaced Thursday, with some Iranians suggesting she had left for the Netherlands. It was unclear from her post what country Alizadeh had gone to.

On Friday the head of Iran's Taekwondo Federation, Seyed Mohammad Pouladgar, claimed Alizadeh had assured both her father and her coach that she was traveling as part of her vacation, a trip he claimed was paid for by the Iranian government. He dismissed the reports of Alizadeh's defection as politically motivated rumors amplified by the foreign media.

Alizadeh confirmed the rumors Saturday, saying she "didn't want to sit at the table of hypocrisy, lies, injustice and flattery" and that she did not want to be complicit with the regime's "corruption and lies."

"My troubled spirit does not fit with your dirty economic ties and tight political lobbies. I wish for nothing else than for Taekwondo, safety and for a happy and healthy life, she said adding that she was not invited to go to Europe.

She said the decision was harder than winning Olympic gold. "I remain a daughter of Iran wherever I am," she said.

Her defection came amid anti-government protests in cities across Iran Saturday and international pressure after Iran admitted it had accidentally shot down a Ukrainian passenger airliner, killing all 176 people aboard.

Canada, Sweden and other countries whose citizens died on the plane have increased demands on Tehran to deliver a complete and transparent investigation against the backdrop of fresh US sanctions on Iran and a dangerous escalation with Washington.

"Iran will continue to lose more strong women unless it learns to empower and support them," said US State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus about Alizadeh's defection.

Death of Blue Girl shines light on women's rights in Iran

The Open Stadiums movement will mean the death of Sahar Khodayari will not be in vain.

By Samantha Lewis

The Guardian (20.09.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2n2tRwT> - On 9 September, Iranian football fan Sahar Khodayari, nicknamed Blue Girl, died in hospital after setting herself on fire outside a court in Tehran. She had been charged with "appearing in public without a hijab" after trying to enter Azadi Stadium dressed as a man, flouting the nation's infamous ban on women in sports stadiums.

In an airport transit lounge thousands of kilometres away, as news began to spread of Khodayari's death, a smartphone began to ping. And ping. And ping.

"When I was travelling, this tragedy happened," said the woman behind the @openStadiums Twitter account, who declined to be named for security reasons.

"Between my flights, I was talking to media and trying to put the word out. I talked and wrote to several journalists, but my time was short, and I was having lots of anxiety attacks.

"So many journalists sent me messages on Twitter wanting to write about this story, but they just wanted to write about what happened to Sahar. They could just do a Google search to see what happened to her. But it's really important to write about what was the reason behind what she did. It wasn't a simple thing."

The Open Stadiums movement, which describes itself on Twitter as "A movement of Iranian Women seeking to end discrimination & let women attend stadiums," has been active for almost 15 years.

It began as a small group of female football fans protesting outside Azadi Stadium during a 2005 World Cup qualification match between Iran and Bahrain. Today, it has transformed into a movement for women's rights in Iran more generally, and become a lightning rod for critical discussions on how football's governing bodies act on human rights abuses.

"[The year] 2005 was the start of women claiming this right as a woman's right. For us, it was difficult in several aspects because some other feminists were so against us; they were saying things like 'in Iran we have much more important issues for women's rights and this is nothing compared to them'," Open Stadiums said.

"I think one of the things we tried to show to them is it's a woman's right to access any public places, and we achieved this because now it is a top priority of women's demand for their rights in Iran."

Before social media became popular, Open Stadiums wrote letters to Fifa and the AFC, demanding action be taken on Iran's violation of human rights. They wrote to domestic and international news outlets, trying to get somebody to listen, but were largely met with silence.

It wasn't until 2013 that the world's media began to take notice. Former Fifa president Sepp Blatter was coming to Iran, accompanied by executive committee member, Moya Dodd, to meet with the country's officials.

"Moya was one of the first supporters of our stadium campaign," Open Stadiums said.

"Everywhere she went, she talked about this problem. At the time, none of the human rights organisations was following our problem. But when Moya talked about it, Human Rights Watch came and supported us. Lots of other human rights organisations and lots of other journalists around the world came. Basically, she connected us to the world of football a lot more.

"I wanted them to know on their official visit that half of this nation wanted to watch football, but they are banned from stadiums. And it happened Sepp Blatter, in his meeting with officials in Iran, he mentioned it. That was a big deal at the time."

But Blatter's pleas were not heeded by Iran's authorities. And despite changes in leadership in both Iran and Fifa over the next few years, little progress was made towards lifting the stadium ban. That's when Open Stadiums took to Twitter.

"[Twitter] is really important. On one hand, lots of Iranian young people are on Twitter. But on the other hand, unfortunately because of language barriers, so many things happen in Iran but few people around the world get to know what's happening. That was my reason to write 90 per cent in English and share the news of what's happening around this campaign," Open Stadiums said.

"Now, I can say maybe 90 per cent of women know about this ban, and even if they don't like football, they want such a barrier [removed] from women in this society."

In 2018, Open Stadiums accompanied several other activists overseas to attend the World Cup in Russia, banners and placards in tow. Whenever the Iranian men's national team played a game, Open Stadiums was there, forcing the world to take notice.

The death of Blue Girl earlier this month once again catapulted Open Stadiums into the spotlight.

In the days following her death, the @openStadiums account was flooded with online support from individuals, clubs and organisations expressing sadness and outrage at the tragedy. A tweet from Khodayari's beloved Esteghlal FC (after whose blue and white colours she is nicknamed), went viral.

"Our dear Sahar burnt herself to death, when she was charged to 6 month in jail for ... going to the stadium to support her #Esteghlal. She supported us despite the politics made it illegal for her, but what we do can do to support her? ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. We are cowards," @EsteghlalFC_En.

"It is sad for me because I was thinking 'a girl died, and I got followers.' It's such a sad, sad story," Open Stadiums said.

"Although I was having a terrible time, I feel like it is my responsibility to write about her. I really want to see something good and see justice come out of this tragedy. Just mourning a person is not enough.

"It was difficult even opening my feed because every post was a picture of Sahar. Her eyes looking at you. Everybody was showing their sadness about this tragedy."

Open Stadiums fears that the nature of today's news cycle means Khodayari—and the Open Stadiums movement—will slip from view once again.

"When you see some girls putting on beards and male clothes to go to the stadiums, for some people, that's just a nice photo," she said.

"But many of these girls went to morality police detention—they sexually assaulted them, they had to be naked, they investigated their private parts. It was a really huge deal, and many of them were under 18 years old.

"Fifa is responsible for Sahar's death and what us activists are going through. You should see how much pressure Sahar suffered during the time of detention and afterward. Fifa and AFC are completely responsible for these huge problems that are happening. Their lack of effort is threatening other people's lives."

For women in Iran, the Open Stadiums movement is about so much more than access to football games. Over the past 14 years, it has become a vehicle for women to re-assert their human rights and take a stand against the oppressive ideologies that have shaped their lives. The world's media has a responsibility to continue telling their stories. Blue Girl's death must not be in vain.

"If you come once to Iran and walk in Tehran's streets, you'll see that women are fighters here. Every day they are fighting for their rights. They are fighting against compulsory hijab. They are fighting for going to school, to universities, for their jobs; everything," Open Stadiums said.

"You have to be a fighter because there's lots of walls in front of you. They want women to be a mother, to stay inside cooking, to be a wife and these kinds of things. But the young generation are vocal, and they really want to claim their rights.

"And now, with the stadiums, it's some sort of a symbol for women—if they can go to the stadiums, it means they break one of the walls in front of them. It will happen. You cannot stop us."

Women attacked for trying to watch football match in Iran

By Maya Oppenheim

The Independent UK (10.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/30ulGbp> - As the Women's World Cup kicks off, female football fans in Iran's capital have been attacked by security guards for trying to watch a men's football match between Iran and Syria.

The women managed to buy tickets to watch the game after the official website of the Iranian football federation initially put tickets on sale without blocking the option for women, despite the fact Iranian women are forbidden from watching football matches.

However, the federation then blocked the option for women to buy tickets the next day, without providing any explanation.

While Iranian women were blocked from entering the stadium and violently attacked by the state security force despite holding tickets, Syrian women were allowed to enter.

At least two of those women were arrested and taken into custody but their fate remains unknown, according to the women's committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

Several of the women who were attacked were interviewed by the sports reporter of the state-run daily Etemad.

"One of the troops placed his foot on the chest of one of the ladies, took away her cellphone and tore away her purse," one of the women said while crying. "The security forces attacked us in a raid and dragged one of the ladies on the ground."

Another woman said: "They kicked us, punched us and swore at us, without our doing anything wrong. There were several of us, women, who were waiting on the lawns outside the west gate of the stadium. We were not chanting. We were not talking. We were not even holding the Iranian flag."

Mansoureh Mills, an Amnesty International Iran researcher, said: "Once again the Iranian authorities are persecuting women simply for their love of football."

"For decades, the Iranian authorities have banned women from football stadiums – with dozens of women arrested trying to enter stadiums to watch football matches in the past year alone. The Iranian authorities should remove these discriminatory bans and allow women and girls to freely access sports stadiums without fear of violence and arrest."

According to Iran Human Rights Monitor, male security guards entered the locker room of female football players in the Iranian city of Shiraz and attacked them verbally and physically on 25 May.

Iranian female football players did not take part in this year's Women's World Cup – which is taking place in France from 7 June to 7 July – despite winning the championship games in Asia.

Female football players do not receive any type of private or public support in Iran, and are not able to draw any non-governmental or private sponsors due to women's sports not being broadcast by the state television networks.

The Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran has had numerous warnings from Fifa in past years for banning women from going inside sports stadiums.

The federation's security manager announced there had been no change in government policy and women continue to be banned from entering sports stadiums. Federation officials and the firms in charge of selling tickets later claimed providing women with the option of buying tickets had been the result of a technical error.

Iranian women have been barred from watching stadium football matches for most of the 40 years since the Islamic Revolution. The clerical regime has been reported to have hired female security forces since August last year to deal with women who attempt to sneak into the stadium with men's make-up.

In Iran women who do not wear a hijab, or are seen to be wearing a “bad hijab” by allowing some of their hair to show, face punishments spanning from fines to imprisonment. Female athletes have to wear the hijab during competitions.

Nevertheless, there has been resistance to the enforced hijab over recent years, with some women shaving their hair and dressing as men. Many women are opposed to being forced to cover their heads and protesters have removed their hijabs and twirl them on sticks in defiance.

1500 cases of child marriage in one province only

Radio Farda (31.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2KvEnGE> - Figures from Iran suggest child-marriage is rampant in the country, with girls younger than 14 forced to take husbands.

The practice is most prevalent in rural areas with no age-limit on the age of the men that the girls may be forced to suffer as a spouse.

More than 1,500 cases of child marriage have been registered in the province of Hamedan, western Iran, a local-judiciary authority has revealed.

Saeed Golestani, the area’s crime-prevention deputy, said 1,596 underage girls were pushed into marriages during the Iranian-calendar year ending 20 March 2018.

He added the coercion of girls was encouraged to anchor boys to their hometowns.

“Villagers of Hamedan,” he said, “believe that when the boys come of age, they leave their places of birth in search of a job and become reluctant to marry their fellow villagers.”

Golestani added that girls who reached the age of 15 were more difficult to force into marriages as they were considered too old.

Shari’a courts can permit girls aged under 15 to marry, with the demand that the marriage be registered – in many cases, parents did not wait for a court ruling to give away their daughters, only registering the marriage years later, the deputy said.

There is no upper limit on the age that a girl’s husband might be.

Golestani’s announcement followed news reports of 1,400 girls aged under-14 having been married in Zanzan province, with 1,054 girls in northern Khorasan.

In April, the Zanzan governor-general’s office estimated that 36,000 underage girls were forced into marriages across Iran, though only Zanzan, Hamedan and Khorasan have released figures.

There are no signs that the phenomenon is on the decline.

A bill to stop child marriages was recently blocked in the Majles, Iran’s parliament, by legislators who included women.

Iran’s Civil Code allows underaged girls’ to be forced into marriages by fathers who have a court permit.

Ironically, children as young as 13 can be married in Iran while they have to wait until the age of 18 before they can vote or drive cars.

The story of Raha, an 11-year old girl forced to marry a 50-year old man led to heated debate in February. The man already has a wife and seven children. He paid around \$1,500 to Raha's parents to marry her.

After strong public outcry the government intervened and transferred Raha to a care center.

The ultraconservative ayatollahs insist that a girl can be allowed to marry once she reaches puberty, while there are some dissenting clerics who condemn child marriage as "illegitimate and against religious principles".

Ayatollah Bayat Zanjani told ILNA news website in February, "Since marrying underage children is unfair, it is illegitimate".

But a 99-year old ultraconservative ayatollah announced, "Setting a legal age for girls to marry is against religious regulations since only fathers have the right to decide when to give away their daughters, regardless of their age."

4,000 child marriages registered just in North khorasan province in one year

Iran Human Rights Monitor (24.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GEcY30> - More than 4,000 child marriages of girls between 10 to 19 years of age have been reported in North Khorasan Province, from March 2018 to March 2019.

Ali Zahedinia, the director of Iran's Census Organization in North Khorasan province said that the largest number of marriages has been registered for girls between 15 and 19 years old.

Admitting to just one aspect of this catastrophe he added, "In 1397, the marriages of 1,054 girls between 10 and 14 years old have been registered in North Khorasan province," the state-run IRNA news agency reported on April 20, 2019.

In remarks carried by the state-run ISNA news agency on April 16, 2019, Masihollah Soltani, an official in Zanjan's governorate, announced, "From 36,000 registered marriages for girls under 14 in Iran, 1,400 took place in Zanjan," adding, "Unfortunately, Zanjan ranks among the top provinces with regards to child marriages."

A woman member of the regime's parliament acknowledged in June 2018 that there are 24,000 young widows under 18 years of age in Iran, a consequence of rampant child marriages in the country.

Masoume Aghapour Alishahi, representative of the women's faction at the regime's parliament, considers cultural and economic poverty in villages as the main causes of child marriages in Iran, majority of which end up in divorce. She explains: "Unfortunately, due to the absence of high schools in villages, girls are unable to continue their education beyond the primary level; and are consequently forced by their parents to get married."

In early January, Parvaneh Salahshouri, head of the women's faction in the regime's parliament said that six per cent of Iranian girls get married between 10 and 14.

It came while the bill proposing to increase the marriage age for girls was turned down in December 2018, by the parliamentary Judicial Committee.

"We continue to see child marriages between 9 and 14 years of age... Some 6 per cent of those who get married are girls between 10 and 14," Salahshouri said.

Girl-child marriage, which is one of the examples of violence against women, has been institutionalized by the Iranian regime by setting the legal age of marriage at 13. According to the regime's officials and experts, some 180,000 early marriages take place in Iran every year and comprise 24 per cent of the total number of marriages.

A social expert revealed that at present, 41,000 early marriages under the age of 15 take place in Iran every year.

Only in 2017, the marriages of at least 37,000 Iranian girls between the ages of 10 and 14 have been registered. It has also been reported that there are 24,000 widows under 18, of which 15,000 are under the age of 15.

Another report published in Iranian media in 2017 said that 17% of girls in Iran married under the age of 18. The numbers did not include "temporary marriages", which is a spreading phenomenon in Iran.

Just in the past decade, close to 400,000 girls were forced to marry in Iran despite being under 15 years of age.

Abuse of 11-year-old child bride in Iran sees some lawmakers calling for reforms

Center for Human Rights in Iran (21.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2BXMmYa> - News of an 11-year-old girl in the Iranian city of Ilam being repeatedly raped after being illegally married off to a man four times her age has renewed protests by some members of Parliament against the law that allows child marriage.

The child, referred to by the pseudo name of "Raha" by media outlets, was placed in the care of the State Welfare Organization (SWO) following the intervention of a provincial prosecutor because the marriage had taken place without the approval of a local court as required by civil law.

But thousands of other child brides remain at grave risk in Iran, where there is no minimum marriageable age. For girls under the age of 13 and boys under the age of 15, families and husbands must obtain legal approval for the marriage.

In December 2018, the parliamentary Committee for Judicial and Legal Affairs rejected a bill to ban marriage for girls under the age of 13, prompting widespread condemnation from civil rights advocates.

According to UNICEF, 17 percent of girls in Iran are married before the age of 18 and three percent are married before the age of 15. This number only accounts for registered marriages. In July 2016, Mohammad Kazemi, a member of Parliament's Judicial and Legal Affairs Committee, referenced the "unofficial marriages" that go unregistered in Iran "especially in the border regions and deprived parts of the country."

"Uprooting the child marriage phenomenon requires a multi-dimensional effort in cultural, social and educational fields," a lawyer who focused on rights issues when they were based in Iran told the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI).

"But the most immediate step has to be the government putting an end to the law that in effect permits physical and psychological violence against young girls," added the source who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The Imam Ali Society (IAS), an Iran-based non-governmental charity that provides support to vulnerable women and children throughout the country, was the first to report the news about Raha being married off to a man who is "almost 50 years old."

"Raha was saved from becoming a slave under a law that does not prevent and punish child marriages," tweeted the organization on February 11, 2019 referring to the fact that Raha would not have been removed from the home if her family had obtained the necessary legal approvals.

"Figures show that just in 1395 [the Iranian year ending in March 2017], 1,289 marriages were registered of girls under the age of 14 to men over the age of 30," said another tweet. "In 112 of those cases, the marriages were under circumstances similar to Raha's, meaning the men were over the age of 40, and in six cases the men were over the age of 60!"

"Raha was lucky that her compatriots were able to hear her story. But what about the other children who are being traded far from public view?" asked IAS.

IAS group member Zahra Kahram said Raha's case was accidentally discovered during the implementation of a project aimed at providing medical and psychological checkups to women in a rural part of Ilam Province's Helilan region.

"The man has seven children from his first wife," said Kahram. "Raha has not reached puberty and yet he has been having intercourse with her every night. She has suffered much physical and mental harm and cries constantly."

"When the IAS looked into the marriage, we noticed that Raha had been forced to marry the man six months earlier in exchange for only 15 million tomans [approximately \$3,147 USD] paid to her family because of financial need."

Later inquiries revealed that the marriage had taken place without fulfilling requirements stipulated in Article 1041 of the Civil Code including getting the father's consent or the court's approval for girls getting married before the age 13.

Article 50 of Iran's Family Protection Law stipulates punishment of six months imprisonment for men who get married without the necessary legal approvals and six months jail time for the child's father or legal guardian.

It also states that if it is proven that sexual relations caused a girl's death or "permanent physical disability or illness," the man would have to pay blood money and receive a fifth- or fourth-degree prison sentence.

According to Islamic law, *Diyah*, known as "blood money" in English, is paid as financial compensation to the victim or heirs of a victim in cases of murder, bodily harm, or property damage

In response to inquiries by the IAS and the SWO, Raha was placed in state care and moved to an SWO safe house. Warrants were also issued for the arrest of her father and the man she was married to. The latter was reportedly arrested on February 11.

Growing condemnation of child marriages

Word of Raha's case led to renewed condemnation of the unlimited marriageable age in Iran.

Labor and Social Welfare Minister Mohammad Shariatmadari and a number of lawmakers condemned the case and criticized child marriages despite the taboo in Iran of openly criticizing politically sensitive state policies.

The day after Raha's case was reported, Ayatollah Asadollah Bayat Zanjani, a Shia theologian, also issued a fatwa stating that child marriage violates the principles of Islam.

"Getting married to children is an unjust act and because it's unjust it is not legitimate," he said.

There are several ayatollahs in Iran who can issue fatwas and Shia Muslims can choose which of these ayatollahs to follow as their point of reference for religious matters. That means a Shia Muslim could ignore Zanjani's fatwa if a different ayatollah has declared the opposite.

Zahra Saie, a member of the Parliamentary Committee for Social Affairs, also condemned child marriage after hearing about Raha's case.

"The studies we have carried out show that those who marry early have a higher divorce rate and naturally as a result suffer more," said Saie, a member of Parliament's Youth Faction. "Physiologically, the girls are more frail at that age."

She added: "In order to properly raise their children, today's mothers have to be educated and informed. Men and women have to be in a particular physical and mental condition in order for a successful family to take shape. Young girls and boys who get married don't have a full understanding of life. Islamic theology does not restrict marriage at a certain age but if we want successful families we have to see what is the right age for marriage."

Reacting to the prosecutor's decision to remove Raha from the man's home, attorney Ali Mojtahedzade tweeted: "When a public defender, despite legal shortcomings, steps in to deal with a child marriage in Ilam, it is an indication that society has become more sensitive and concerned about these issues regardless of the powerful opponents."

Journalist and political activist Reza Bahrami asked: "Those who are against banning child marriage, do they have anything to say about the tragic case of an 11-year-old child marrying a 50-year-old man in Ilam?"

Journalist Hediye Kimiaee commented: "The prosecutor in Ilam has said that families who violate Article 50 of the Family Protection Law will be prosecuted. So that means we do have a law but we are not enforcing it. What is being done for other Rahas who are quietly victimized?"

Legal efforts to ban marriages to girls under the age of 13

Although the Parliamentary Committee for Legal and Judicial Affairs rejected a proposal to confront child marriages, there is still a possibility that it will be debated on the legislative floor.

"The Women's Faction has asked the parliamentary leadership to include this proposal in the legislative process for further review so that we can look into various points of view and get the best results," said lawmaker Zahra Saie.

Masoumeh Ebtekar, Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, also announced that her office is drafting a bill to eliminate Article 1041's provision allowing the marriage of girls under the age of 13 and boys under the age of 15.

Instant verbal divorce rips families apart in Iran's Kurdish region

By Leila Alikarami

Al Monitor (02.07.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2KJ7NT4> - Rozhan thought that she was in a happy and loving marriage — until her husband divorced her through an archaic Islamic practice that she was scarcely aware of.

Rozhan, 30, lived with her husband, Shaho, 41, and their two small children in Mariwan, a border town in the Kurdish region in western Iran. Last spring, Rozhan told her husband that she was going to visit her sister who lived just a few streets away. Shaho objected, saying casually, "I triple talaq [divorce] you if you go."

"So I declared that I divorced her three times, not fully aware that this was irreversible," said Shaho, who told his story to Al-Monitor on condition his full name not be used.

Triple talaq, or talaq al bid'ah, is a form of divorce under Islam that enables a man to verbally end his marriage. Different Islamic traditions have different practices around this instant and irrevocable form of verbal divorce, and some scholars consider it irreconcilable with the Islamic idea of marriage. In the Kurdish region of Iran, however, it is invoked often. Once it is declared, the couple is expected to cease to live together immediately. Otherwise, they are committing "zina," an illegitimate relationship between a man and a woman who are not married. When Shaho's father, a conservative Shafi'i cleric, heard the story through his son, he ordered them to stop living together.

In the last Iranian year (which ended March 20), there were 175,000 divorce cases in Iran — the highest since 1965. In the Kurdistan province, Mariwan has one of the highest divorce rates.

"There is no exact data about the cases of triple talaq," Golala Watandoost, a lawyer in the Kurdistan province who works on these cases, told Al-Monitor. "But somewhere between 55% and 60% of the divorces [in the region] are a result of triple talaq."

In some schools of Shiite and Sunni Islam, a man can verbally divorce his wife if he declares his desire to do so on three different occasions with witnesses present. The idea is to give the man time to cool off and reconsider the decision and for the couple to reconcile. Triple talaq, which is only practiced in parts of the Sunni Islamic world, involves no waiting period.

Iran's civil divorce laws greatly favor husbands, who have an incontestable right to divorce. Until 2002, men didn't even need to provide a reason for divorce before the court. But despite the legal changes, the situation remains imbalanced. Men can initiate a divorce on almost any grounds, including the wife's sickness, disobedience or refusal to

have sex. Women can initiate divorce on more limited grounds, such as insanity, inability to provide for the family, abuse or impotence.

"I love my wife and I want her to be with me, but I can't go and live with her," Shaho told Al-Monitor. "There is too much social pressure on us and we had to separate." For the time being, Rozhan has been given custody of the younger of the two children, aged 2. The older one, 7 years old, lives with Shaho's father.

If a divorced couple wants to remarry, the woman then must marry another man first even if it is for an hour, then ask for a divorce so that she can remarry her ex-husband. This loophole is called "nikah halala," literally "marriage of legitimization."

Some of the repentant divorcees in the Kurdish region have fixed triple talaq through a swift nikah halala. "There are clerics that can fix the triple talaq for you in return for 50,000 tomans [\$11]," Zara, a 40-year-old woman from the small Kurdish town of Paveh, told Al-Monitor. "In the past, the clerics would simply find a man for the woman to marry, spend the night under his roof and then get divorced and return to her first husband."

"In the old days in our village, I remember on three separate occasions the village clergy found a crazy person and married three women to him who were subjected to triple talaq by their husbands," Qader, a 61-year-old a farmer from Mariwan, told Al-Monitor via telephone. "Basically, this was a religious trick because the crazy person would be persuaded to divorce the women after sleeping with them for one night."

In most cases, triple talaq is final — often used when men want a quick out, particularly if they want to remarry someone else. In that case, women are left stranded with little recourse and many questions — the division of goods and children — unsettled.

Triple talaq has been a problem in other countries as well, such as Pakistan, Iraq and Bangladesh. Women's movements have led to India first banning, then taking steps to criminalize it as unconstitutional.

Despite the challenges triple talaq presents, Iranian law presently sanctions it and allows Sunnis — as all recognized religious minorities — the right to apply their community's own personal status laws.

But the practice of triple talaq is gradually getting more pushback from women's rights activists, lawyers and human rights defenders who are pushing Tehran to ban it. They claim that there is judicial grounds to do so, as the family status law of recognized religious minorities only has legal authority when it does not go against the public order and does not injure public morals. The activists argue that triple talaq brings extensive harm and chaos to the lives of many women, children and families. Many Sunni Kurdish human rights defenders have begun speaking out on the suffering caused by triple talaq in the last few years.

This bloc also has support among the clergy. Ranking Iranian Sunni cleric Molavi Abdul Hamid called triple talaq "forbidden" and emphasized the need for women to enjoy equality before the law and in society in general.

The issue poses a dilemma for the Iranian authorities, who may come under fire for intervening to stop practices particular to the country's Kurdish Sunni community or may be accused of allowing unfair practices if they do not.

Read more: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/iranian-kurdish-women-suffer-under-triple-talaq.html#ixzz5Kngq4gba>

The Islamic Republic's war on women

The election of Hassan Rouhani gave new momentum to Iran's devout Muslim feminists — but the mullahs aren't having it.

By Ziba Mir-Hosseini

Foreign Policy (29.08.2016) - <http://atfp.co/2cjfXj8> - The phone calls started about six weeks ago. Men who didn't introduce themselves, working for Iran's security agencies, rang the country's most prominent women's rights activists and demanded they show up for interrogations. All the activists were told the same thing: "Don't tell anyone we've called you here. Don't speak to the media, don't breathe a word to anyone." But word seeped out, first in Tehran's feminist circles and then among political activists, who traded accounts of interrogations and lines of questioning.

The Iranian government's crackdown on feminists, one of the Islamic Republic's periodic intimidation campaigns against women's rights activists, is still underway. But the present iteration isn't just a push-and-pull struggle between the government and civil society, or between the censors and the country's most prominent women's magazine — it's a proxy battle between the president and the country's hard-liners.

Iran's women's rights activists, both religious and secular, seized the space offered by President Hassan Rouhani's 2013 election to emerge from the underground and engage again in public life. The Revolutionary Guards and the clerical establishment have responded by charging a vast international "feminist conspiracy" to undermine the Islamic Republic, funded by wealthy Western donors, intellectually articulated by feminist academics based abroad, and conducted by foot soldiers inside Iran — and even inside the president's cabinet.

Iran's hard-line clerical and military authorities have always been wary of women's gender activism, whether by secular "feminists" or religious "gender justice" advocates. They seem especially incensed, however, by Iran's homegrown Islamic feminists, who work for gender equality from a faith-based perspective, arguing from progressive readings of the Quran and fiqh, or the Islamic legal tradition, for greater participation in the labor force and better legal safeguards. This "egalitarian Islam" poses a special threat to hard-liners, because it challenges, from within the Islamic tradition, their conservative interpretation of the sacred texts in which they have invested so much since the revolution.

That's why hard-liners took special note of Rouhani's appointment of Shahindokht Molaverdi, for whom "egalitarian Islam" has been an intellectual bedrock, as his deputy minister for women's affairs. Trained as a lawyer, the devout Molaverdi was active in the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005, helping expand Iran's network of women's NGOs. She spent the stifling Mahmoud Ahmadinejad years working in civil society. Her views were progressive, but her determination to work within Iran's political system made her highly diplomatic. She always stopped short, for example, of explicitly calling herself a feminist. When she was asked during a U.N. meeting in New York why Iran had not yet joined the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), her answer was nuanced. She said there were certain factions in Iran, as in the United States, strongly opposed to it and suggested there were other ways her government would enhance women's human rights.

Since taking office, Molaverdi's religious leanings have given her a degree of protection that secular feminists lack altogether, but she has confronted hard-line attacks all the same. Conservative news sites objected to her appointment, and hard-liners in the clerical and military establishments accused her of undermining Islamic values by

encouraging women to work. They took issue with her collaboration with women's activists, her stance on the 2009 election, and even her master's thesis on violence against women. For the hard-line establishment, she was a clear threat: too grassroots, too effective, too connected. It even rankled that she had managed to become the first woman in Iran to secure a license to run a notary office, the privilege of clerics since the early 20th century.

The conservative establishment's anxiety has also been fueled by Molaverdi's successes in office. Her aim of encouraging women's participation in politics resulted in what hard-liners have called the "gendering" of the last parliamentary election, in February. Last October, a coalition of female activists, with Molaverdi's encouragement, announced at a press meeting the launch of the "Campaign to Change the Masculine Face of Parliament" by inviting more women to stand for election. Iranian reformists had their own separate meetings, demanding, among other things, a 30 percent quota for women. This revival of civil society paid off. Moderates affiliated with Rouhani swept Tehran, taking all 30 of its parliamentary seats, and, of these new legislators, eight were women. Across the country, there was a fourfold rise in the number of female candidates running for the latest Parliament, which led to doubling the number of female deputies.

That election, and Molaverdi's association with it, rankled Iran's hard-liners. They have responded by training their anger on a magazine run by one of her allies, the legendary publisher Shahla Sherkat.

Zanan-e Emrooz is a relaunch of Zanan, a publication that, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, brought women's issues into Iran's national conversation by convening religious and secular women's activists. It ran stories about everything from nose jobs to domestic violence, making the case that gender equality was entirely Islamic. It was a sort of religiously tinged Ms. magazine, an extraordinary publication unlike anything published in the Middle East. And it wasn't just a forum for activists like Molaverdi — it made women's legal and political rights the concern of ordinary women across the country. At least until then-President Ahmadinejad shut it down in 2008, accusing the magazine of "blackening" the country and spreading pessimism.

Zanan-e Emrooz was launched in 2014 in the hopeful wake of Rouhani's election. The first edition featured a group of smiling female veterinarians on the cover with the headline, "We Are Happy With This Choice," leaving it intentionally ambiguous whether that was referring to the veterinarians being content with their career choice, or the women's movement being happy with Rouhani. In her editorial announcing the magazine's rebirth, Sherkat wrote that once again it feels as if there is hope, and that after years of silence, journalists like her think they can have a voice. "We know they'll push back against us, but we have no choice," she wrote. Its cheeky October issue of that year, about the rise of "white marriage," otherwise known as couples just living together, prompted a temporary closure, but it soon resumed its predecessor's signature style of high and low feminist conversation.

February's issue would prove a fateful turning point. It featured an interview with the Iranian-Canadian academic Homa Hoodfar, a highly regarded anthropologist based in Montreal. The interview focused on her latest academic book, *Electoral Politics: Making Quotas Work for Women*, which discussed research on women and elections conducted in various countries and fueled the lively Iranian debate about quotas for women in Parliament.

It was not a debate that hard-liners were inclined to have. Hoodfar traveled to Iran last December and returned to Canada, telling friends that the mood was hopeful and that she was optimistic about progress under Rouhani. But after she returned to Iran in February during the parliamentary election cycle, authorities raided her flat the day

before her intended departure. Agents confiscated her passports, laptop, and mobile phone. A string of interrogations culminated in her detention on June 6. A month later, Tehran's prosecutor announced that she, along with three other Iranian dual nationals, had been charged but did not specify the grounds.

Not long after Hoodfar's arrest, articles began trickling out on websites affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards. Hoodfar, one piece claimed, was a foreign agent. Another published a day later featured an elaborate infographic showing the purported financial links between funding bodies in the West and the organs of the "feminist conspiracy" they supported. They alleged that her research was part of a sprawling conspiracy, an international network that with the aid of foreign funding has been seeking to infiltrate Iranian society and government. Not long thereafter, the regime began using Hoodfar and her foreign connections to tarnish influential figures in the Tehran women's movement. Many of them have received the ominous phone calls ordering them in for questioning.

The connect-the-dots of intrigue eventually lead to the Rouhani government itself. Hard-liners angrily cite his administration's attempts to suspend Ahmadinejad-era gender policies, such as a ban on women's studying certain subjects in universities, a reduction in their permissible work hours, and a stricter dress code. The hard-liners claim the Rouhani administration's efforts are nurtured and led by a conspiratorial network with Molaverdi at its center. Articles on conservative websites affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards enumerate her dangerous intentions and actions. Molaverdi's aim of enabling women to participate more widely in the economy, her sustainable employment initiatives, "are in line with feminists who want to push women out of the family, into society, straying from the right path." By "making a model of political women as successful," she is said to be distorting the honorable, traditional image of the country's rural women. (No mention is made that Iran has been an urban-majority country since 1979.) An excessive focus on domestic violence, rape, and the violence against women perpetrated by the Islamic State is "disturbing the public mind," the news site claimed. Ultimately, Molaverdi is seeking to "change women's lifestyle through changing laws and fine-tuning and reducing the religious, traditional aspects of Islam."

Perhaps most far-fetched, in the conspiracy theory spun by hard-liners, is that the diaspora-based feminists are the brains — and funds — behind homegrown feminism in Iran. If there is one major fracture in the world of Iranian feminism, both domestically and in the diaspora, it is between mainstream women's rights activists, who are prepared to work with Islam either out of faith or out of political expediency, and those who are openly hostile to Islam and project an Ayaan Hirsi Ali-esque revulsion for faith. The progression of some women's rights activists to this extreme anti-religious position reflects their despair at years of intense repression in the name of Islam. For years the state only tolerated the activism of religious women and targeted secularists with special violence; with the crackdown on the Green Movement in 2009, state aggression grew so severe that some of them abandoned the middle ground entirely.

The notion that anti-Islam diaspora feminists could be deeply involved in a plot with academics like Hoodfar, who has been the focus of their criticism for what they see as "pro-Islamic views and scholarship," is inconceivable. These dissident feminists, who have long severed real ties with the mainstream women's movement inside the country, are the sort of figures the Iranian regime wishes to hold up as representative of feminism: intentionally disrespectful to religious sensibilities and cosily enmeshed with donor institutions. Their inclusion, women's activists say, is aimed at blackening the credibility of Molaverdi and others by association.

The last issue of Zanan-e-Emrooz appeared in June. In July, a post appeared on its website announcing that it would not be published again until further notice; the closure

was “due to some problems,” but no other reasons were given. Sherkat was among those summoned for regular questioning after Hoodfar’s arrest.

Rouhani’s government, for its part, has made little headway with progressive gender policies, and Molaverdi and her supporters are mostly focused on re-establishing themselves as part of the national conversation. The tough work of correcting Ahmadinejad-era legislation remains. But even given the modesty of their aims, hard-liners seem determined to squelch their re-emergence. The persecution of innocent figures like Hoodfar looks increasingly like part of a concerted plan by hard-liners to undermine the chances of Rouhani’s re-election next year. For now, Rouhani’s government has remained quiet about the stealthy harassment of female activists, but as the 2017 presidential election nears, he will need to say something to convince Iran’s women that he is still on their side.