

Urgent Action

In Focus

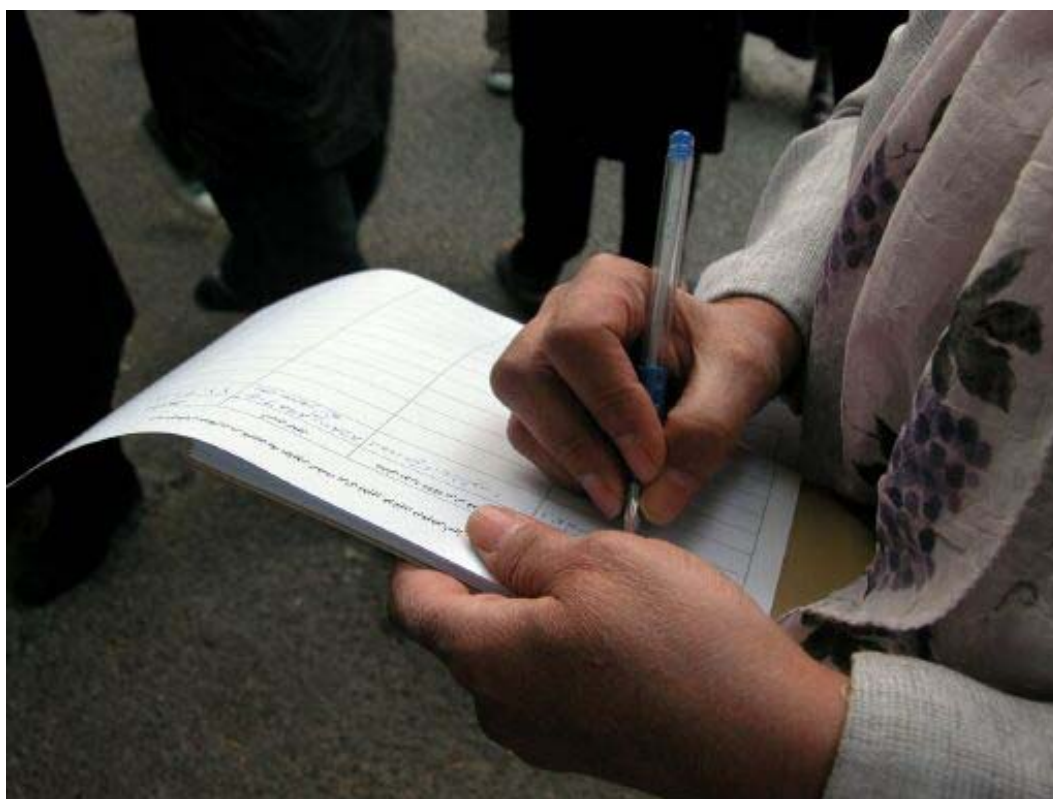
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Discrimination, arrest and imprisonment: the struggle for women's rights in Iran



A woman signs the petition demanding changes to laws discriminating against women in Iran © Private

On International Women's Day, 8 March, a joint statement was issued by lawyer Shirin Ebadi, winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize, and Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International. The statement called on the Iranian government to end its discrimination against women, saying:

...In Iran, women face serious and

widespread discrimination under the law, which excludes women from critical areas of political participation, treating women as if they were second-class citizens. The women of Iran are entitled to equal status with men under the Iranian legal system. The time is long overdue to make this a reality... As long as women are denied human rights... there can be no justice and no peace. Recognizing

women's equal rights, therefore, is an essential requirement for the creation of strong, sustainable and stable societies and ensuring that women enjoy equality with men in all areas of life is a key step to making human rights a universal reality.

The statement heralded Amnesty International's support for the "Campaign for Equality", an initiative of Iranian women's rights activists, aiming to collect a million signatures from Iranians in support of changes to the law to end legalised discrimination against women.

However, just four days before this joint statement was issued, 33 women were arrested during a protest in the Iranian capital, Tehran, in an apparent attempt to deter others from organizing events to mark International Women's Day. Though the Iranian government is a party to several international human rights treaties that call for the elimination of discrimination based on gender, it seems that they are far from achieving this.



Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi meets Irene Khan on a trip to the IS. © AI

The campaign for equality in Iran

"While the brothers enjoyed happy lives... attending social events and parties, the sisters were each imprisoned by men who demanded cooking, cleaning and childbearing. When my father passed away, the brothers took the majority of the inheritance... Now, it is too late for me, I am pleased to know that my signature may pave the future for younger women so they do not have to suffer as I did." – A 76-year-old signatory to the "Campaign for Equality" petition

In Iran, women are considered second class citizens. The women's rights activists behind the "Campaign for Equality" are pressing for reform of laws where they face widespread discrimination, including in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

Iranian laws are weighted heavily against women. Criminal harm suffered by a woman is less severely punished than that suffered by a man. Evidence given by women in court has half the value of that of a man. Although the legal age for marriage is 13, fathers can apply for permission to arrange that their

daughters are married earlier – for example, to men much older than their daughters.

On 12 June 2006 a coalition of hundreds of women and men gathered peacefully in the capital, Tehran, to protest against such discriminatory laws. They were violently dispersed by security forces, who arrested around 70 of them. Five of those arrested (women's rights activists Fariba Davoodi Mohajer, Shahla Entesari, Noushin Ahmadi Khorassani, Parvin Ardalan and Sussan Tahmasebi) are still on trial on charges of "propaganda against the system", "acting against national security" and "participating in an illegal demonstration". Others have also been charged in connection with the 12 June demonstration, but have not yet been summoned to court. One woman, journalist Zhila Bani Ya'qoub, was tried and acquitted in January 2007 on a charge of "participating in an illegal demonstration".

In August 2006, Iranian women's groups launched the "Campaign for Equality". Their attempts to hold a public rally were blocked by the authorities. Nevertheless, their website (currently: www.we-change.org) went live on the day of the campaign launch, offering information about the campaign, and an opportunity for Iranian women to sign the petition online. There are currently around 3,000 signatories to the petition. The campaign's website has been filtered by the Iranian authorities on several occasions in recent weeks, making it difficult for people in Iran to access information about the campaign.

The petition is only one aspect of the campaign, which is committed to creating change through grassroots and civil society initiatives. Volunteers receive basic legal training and then travel to the provinces to promote the campaign and to collect signatures. Talking with women in their homes, as well as in public places such as parks, universities, health centres and religious gatherings, they

learn about their problems and tell them about their rights and the need for legal reform.

Protest crushed

On 4 March, a group of women were protesting outside Branch 6 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, where they had gathered to protest peacefully at the trial of the five women charged in connection with the demonstration held on 12 June 2006. The National Security Police arrested 33 of the protesters, including four of the five women on trial, and held them incommunicado. Some of the women later described being held in cold, damp cells, without toilet facilities. The detainees were apparently forced to sleep on the floor, and were required to share blankets for warmth. Those detained have also reported being blindfolded and interrogated by security forces during the night, depriving them of sleep. Amnesty International spoke out against the detention of the women, and mobilized the Urgent Action network on their behalf (see UA 52/07, MDE 13/021/2007, 5 March 2007, and follow-ups).

All but two of the women were released without charge between 6 and 9 March, although they may face charges at a later date. The remaining two activists, Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh and Shadi Sadr (who is also the lawyer of one of the five activists on trial over the June 2006 demonstration), were released on bail of 200 million tomans (over US\$215,000) on 19 March. Amnesty International had declared all of them to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to free expression and free association. They are likely to face trial in the future, possibly on charges including "disturbing public order" and "acting against state security", but Amnesty International currently has no information as to whether they have yet been formally charged with any offence. The organization is continuing to campaign on their behalf, including

through appeals sent by the Urgent Action network.

On 15 March, the Raahi Legal Centre, a centre founded by Shadi Sadr, which provides legal advice for marginalized and under-represented women, and the Non-Governmental Organizations Training Centre, founded by Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, were shut down by Revolutionary Court officials. The officials

reportedly inspected the premises, took pictures and sealed the offices shut. Another non-governmental organization, Volunteer Activists (*Koneshgaran-e Davtaleb*), was also shut down on the same day, and its director Dr Sohrab Razzaghi was interrogated for several hours and had personal property removed from his home by security officials.



Shadi Sadr and Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, activists arrested on 4 March. © www.kosoof.com

Amnesty International condemned the arrests, saying: "Rather than arresting peaceful demonstrators, the Iranian authorities should be taking seriously women's demands for equality before the law and addressing discrimination against women wherever it exists in the Iranian legal system."

The arrests of the 33 women protesters may have been another attempt by the authorities to block the Campaign for Equality and prevent events going ahead to mark International Women's Day. However, a planned demonstration in protest at discriminatory laws held in front of the Majles (Iran's parliament) went ahead on 8 March. According to reports, this event was forcibly broken up by security forces, who are said to have injured several women. Moreover, at least eight people are reported to have been arrested during an initially peaceful

demonstration to celebrate International Women's Day in Sanandaj, the capital of Kordestan province. Most are believed to have been released shortly afterwards, but at least one, Aso Saleh, a male journalist working for the weekly newspaper *Didgah*, was detained, possibly for more than a week.

However, it seems that, if the authorities are intending to silence the women, their attempts are failing. Iranian women are continuing to sign up to the Campaign for Equality's petition, and it seems that the protests against Iran's discriminatory laws will continue. While the Iranian authorities may continue to try and suppress the voices of activists within the country, the high profile of the campaign and the support lent by Amnesty International and other organizations mean that the women's struggle for gender equality in Iran cannot be stifled.

