

Iranian Women: Between Education and Repression

Rina Bousalis

Iranian women have endured more than 30 years of an Islamist dictatorship that uses religion as a validation for unjust control. Human rights violations against women in Iran are a tragic phenomenon for an otherwise highly developed civilization. Invisible and powerless in a male-dominated society, Iranian women are discouraged from becoming active agents of social change in their country. Government policies concerning issues such as inheritance, divorce, dress code, political involvement, and child custody have long been decided by Islamic traditionalists attempting to enforce their power over women's lives. Since the 1979 Revolution, women have not enjoyed legitimate human rights in Iran, in contrast to the principles outlined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which states:

...it is only natural that women should benefit from a particularly large augmentation of their rights because of the greater oppression that they suffered under the old regime...given the weighty responsibilities that a woman thus assumes, she is accorded in Islam great value and nobility...¹

Conditions of Iranian Women

The position of Iranian women in their society is a paradox: they are strong and active in education, but weak in voicing their own opinions and claiming equal rights. As a result of a very significant educational development in the last 20 years, Iranian women now exceed the number of men graduating from universities. In 2009, there were 107 women for every 100 men enrolled in post-secondary educational institutions, according to United Nations statistics; in 1991, in contrast, there were only 40 women enrolled for every 100 men.² Women can establish careers, and enter and maintain a place in the business world, but they

are still controlled by government, police, and other male figures who ultimately decide what they do, say, and wear.

Through forced compliance and control by the system, women are at the risk of punishment if they dare to express their views. The government resorts to censorship and arrests in the face of actions that hint that women might step out of their cultural and religious bonds. Many women's rights activists have emerged in Iranian society, but they have served harsh prison sentences for their efforts. During the aftermath of the disputed June 12, 2009, presidential election results, the public viewed women protesting alongside men in the streets of Tehran, and witnessed Iranian forces killing an innocent female protester named Neda Soltan. These images made it more apparent than ever before that there is a social wrong that needs to be rectified. What does this brutality convey to the children of our international community? Does it take death and violence to create social change?

The Islamist government of Iran may

soon be facing a war on its cultural and religious policies. Its fundamentalist values have failed to promote justice for women, and women's attitudes have changed. There is a bold young populace in Iran today that by and large despises the system. As Neda's death left the world shocked and outraged at the actions of

Websites

Payvand

<http://payvand.com/blog/>
An Iranian news site that can be used within the social studies curriculum.

The Iranian Cultural & Information Center

www.persia.org
Updated information on Iranian culture and society.

FarsiNet

www.farsinet.com/
A list of Iranian-Persian cultural and professional organizations.

The Dr. Homa Darabi Foundation

www.homa.org
Discussions defending the human rights of women.

Human Rights First

www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders
human rights discussions.

Children of Persia

www.childrenofpersia.org/
providing services to needy Iranian children.

Women for Peace and Justice in Iran

<http://women4peace.org>

Other Resources

Funny in Farsi, by Firoozeh Dumas (New York: Random House, 2004). A humorous book depicting life in America as an Iranian immigrant.

IDEAS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

1. Invite women guest speakers who are familiar with Iranian cultural/religious life.
2. Ask students to compare the governments of Iran and the United States such as:
 - the Iranian Parliament vs. the U.S. Three Branches of Government.
 - Government based on religion
 - Supreme leaders
 - Checks and balances
 - How do the United States and Iran each define 'democracy'?
3. Discuss the importance of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech.
4. Discuss the value of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution relating to freedom of the press.
5. Discuss the Islamist ideology of the Iranian government. Do any of the Muslim states neighboring Iran have a similar ideology?
6. Compare and contrast the Iranian and American law enforcement system: police corruption, brutality, and occurrences that inspired historical events.
7. Compare and contrast the Iranian and American court system: are all people entitled to or receive a fair trial?
8. How have female university graduates in Iran made a difference in their country?
 - Simulate an interview with an Iranian women who honors the hijab. Imagine the answers to these questions:
 - a. In comparison to men, how are you being treated?
 - b. What would happen if you opposed the hijab?
 - c. How do you think other people view you?
 - d. How do you view yourself?
9. Compare and contrast the U.S. Civil Rights movement to the turbulent undercurrents in Iranian society today. Discussion topics could include:
 - *Brown vs. Board of Education*
 - Discrimination, racism, and the violation of rights
 - The concept "separate but equal"
 - U.S. women's rights movement compared to women's rights in Iran.



REUTERS/Stringer

A student holds a placard reading: "Censorship is outrageous not women," during a student day demonstration inside Tehran University, in Iran, December 7, 2008.

Suggested Student Projects

Conduct research on these topics.

- Iranian women artists. Do they express their inner needs, wants, and struggles through their art?
- Iranian novelists and songwriters. What do they write about? Are their lyrics or prose focused on 'change' and social issues?
- Iranian women role models.
- Zahra Rahnavaard (wife of former presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi): Professor and Chancellor of Alzahra University in Tehran, 1998-2006.

the Iranian government, it also brought about a new and unusual form of "green" movement, a color symbolizing global empathy for Iranian human rights. Mir Hossein Mousavi, the Iranian presidential candidate of 2009 whose election upset provoked a flourish of protests, developed into the driving force behind the green democratic movement. However, it has been his wife, Zahra Rahnavaard, who has played a renowned role as an Islamic feminist, artist, scholar, and political theorist. Rahnavaard served as professor and chancellor of Alzahra University in Tehran, the capital, from 1998 to 2006, and her speeches have

made her an inspiration and symbol of hope for Iranian women today.³

Perhaps it takes a senseless loss of life, such as Neda's, to initiate change. One can only hope that her sacrifice and others like it will lead Iran to take its first steps towards transformation, and offer a second chance to a country whose women face imprisonment and brutality in the name of the hijab, the enforced Iranian dress code. Although many young women accept Islamic principles, they are becoming increasingly rebellious in asking for social change. Young women today are turning away from the hijab, showing that they are more than

just individuals covered with fabric. As a small measure of opposition, women are taunting the law by pushing their rousari, a scarf-like head covering, back just a little to let their hair show.

Education for Liberation

As opposition to the regime has been known to result in harsh punishment, education remains the most promising weapon for change. With approximately 75 percent of Iran's population under 25 years old, it is important to educate students. This will give Iranian youth an opportunity to share their voices, and show that "there is no dividing line between religion, culture, society, and government."¹⁴ With increased education, Iranian women and girls can create a better way of life for themselves, and young Iranian men can avoid following the footsteps of their elders in a "do as they see" syndrome. An educated population is more likely to promote programs and activities to eliminate intolerance and discrimination against women. 🌐

Notes

1. World Legal Information Institute. The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran (adopted 1979, revised 1995) www.worldlii.org/ir/legis/const/1992/.
2. The information can be found in the statistics of the United Nations, *UN Statistical Yearbook*, 2010 (New York: United Nations, 2011), 63. The Yearbook is accessible at http://unstats.un.org/unsd/syb/syb55/SYB_55.pdf. Similar information can be found in the statistics of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which show that Iran has a score above 1.0 on the gender parity index for tertiary education. A score above 1.0 shows a larger enrollment of women than men, while a score below 1.0 reflects a larger enrollment of men than women. See Chapter 5, "Enrollment and Gender Trends: Tertiary Education," in UNESCO, *World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education* (Paris, France: UNESCO, 2012), 80. The information can be accessed at www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/world-atlas-gender-equality-education-2012-en.pdf.
3. Abbas Milani, "The Mousavi Mission," *The New Republic* (March 11, 2010): 12-15. The article is accessible at www.tnr.com/article/environment-energy/the-mousavi-mission.
4. Lindsey Hilsum, "Jeans and Mascara Under the Veil," *New Statesman* 127 (July 1998): 33-34.

RINA BOUSALIS is a social studies teacher at Jefferson High School in Tampa, Florida. She can be contacted at rbousalis@tampabay.rr.com

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in raising global awareness and acting as an underground railroad in securing the freedom of former child soldiers within war-torn northern Uganda. Charlotte and her mother were reunited in 2004 after her daring escape with her children. The CPA has repeatedly hidden Charlotte from her LRA abductors.¹⁴

Abolitionists

In the previous decade, over two million children have been killed and six million seriously injured due to armed conflicts, according to estimates.¹⁵ Additionally, tens of thousands of former child soldiers have gone through government-run programs known as disarmament, demobilization, and rehabilitation (DDR). Unfortunately, these programs, which often focus on social reintegration, have been criticized for dealing inadequately with the psychosocial needs of ex-combatants and neglecting females in the rehabilitation process.¹⁶

The numbers of abducted child soldiers are grim. Fortunately, there are modern-day abolitionists fighting on the front lines against this crime of humanity. The CPA is only one of many groups attempting to provide safe havens and shedding light on the continued use of child soldiers. Authors like Jimmie Briggs and organizations such as the Invisible Children, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, and Amnesty International have thrown light on this tragic global issue.

Conclusion

While children in the United States conquer computer-animated video games in order to establish high scores, many Ugandan children have been forced to engage in the destruction of real villages to survive. Many Americans are unaware of these conditions and, thus, cannot be expected to take action. However, if teachers work to enlighten their students on the reality of the situation of child soldiers, these same students, in

their active role as global citizens, can become empowered to participate in a new generation of abolitionists. 🌐

Notes

1. Charles London, *Voices of Children in War: One Day the Soldiers Came* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007).
2. Ibid.
3. Stephen J. Thornton, "Incorporating Internationalism into the Social Studies Curriculum," *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*, ed. N. Noddings (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005), 81-92.
4. United Nations: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General. "Children and Armed Conflict," <http://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/>.
5. Child Soldiers Global Report 2008, "Child Soldiers: Progress, but Too Little," Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/files/country_pdfs/FINAL_2008_Global_Report.pdf.
6. Conversation with Jimmie Briggs, October 1, 2008, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL.
7. Matt Hobson, "Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in Armed Conflict," Save the Children, London (2005) www.global-sisterhood-network.org/gsn/downloads/forgotten-casualties-of-war-girls-in-armed-conflict.pdf.
8. Ibid.
9. Unite for Children, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," UNICEF. www.unicef.org/crc/.
10. United Nations: Human Rights Council. "Annual Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy," www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/21/38.
11. United Nations: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General. "Children and Armed Conflict." <http://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/>.
12. Child Soldiers Global Report 2008.
13. Jimmie Briggs, *Immocents Lost: When Child Soldiers go to War* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2005).
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Theresa Betancourt, I. Borisova, J.E. Rubin-Smith, T. Gingerich, T. Williams, J. Agnew-Blais, *Psychosocial Adjustment and Social Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: The State of the Field and Future Directions* (Austin, Tex.: Psychology Beyond Borders, 2008).

KENNETH T. CARANO is an assistant professor at Western Oregon University. He can be contacted at caranok@wou.edu. **ROBERT W. BAILEY** is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Florida and social studies teacher at Jefferson High School in Tampa, Florida. He can be reached at rwbailey@mail.usf.edu.