

The Organisation for Women's Liberation-Iran



Demonstration in defence of secularism

On 17 January 2004, Islamists have called for demonstration in London to protest the French government's decision to introduce a law banning conspicuous religious symbols in state schools and state institutions. They claim this ban is discriminatory, against women's equal rights, violates women's and girl's rights to education and work, restricts religious freedom and is even anti-pluralism and secularism. All these claims are false and in fact a mockery of the very principles they feign to defend. Ironically, the very Islamic movement that is renowned for intimidating, terrorizing and violating women and girls and their rights, is using norms that are antithetical to its belief system and practice in order to maintain its repressive laws and clothing on women and girls.

Clearly, religion, religious symbols and religious freedoms are private affairs not the affairs of a state. In

fact states are duty-bound to ensure that all religious symbols be abolished from state-run institutions and schools. This is an important aspect of secularism and not vice versa. Also, contrary to claims that it is discriminatory, the ban in fact reverses the discriminatory effects of religion on women and girls. Moreover, maintaining secularism has nothing to do with racism. It is in fact racist to create different laws for religious and Islamic communities in the West and obstruct the access of women and girls in particular to the advances of civilized societies. Finally, protecting girl children from veiling goes beyond issues relating to secularism and redresses the rights of the child from having religious views and clothing imposed on her by her parents through no choice of her own. While a ban on child veiling is welcome in state schools and institutions, the banning of child veiling and

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Maryam Kousha

Organisation for Women's Liberation (OWL) was built on 14th December 2002 in direct response to the growing women's movement in Iran for equality and liberation. The contemporary history of women's movement in Iran dates back to the 1979 uprising, when their struggle and aspirations for an equal and just society for all was crushed by the newly empowered Islamic Republic of Iran.

Women were the first social strata of the society to be suppressed by the Islamic regime. The imposition of Islamic laws, such as the compulsory veil, gender segregation in public places, negation of the right to divorce or custody of children for women, and the subsequent punishments for defying these laws, such as arrests, imprisonment, stoning and execution have all made life a hell for millions of women in Iran.

However, what we are witnessing in Iran is the growing women's movement to combat women's suppression and humiliation. Women in Iran demand freedom, equality, separation of religion from state, and an end to sexual apartheid. OWL belongs to this movement. We regard political Islam as one of the main obstacles in the path of women's movement for change, especially in the Middle Eastern countries.

This bi-weekly online paper is part of our effort to voice the general struggle of women's movement in Iran and gain international support for it. We believe women's rights are universal and strive to build international solidarity for women's liberation. Your feedback, contributions and cooperation are welcomed.

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in defence of secularism**

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religious schools are other crucial steps to fully defend children's rights.

The Organisation of Women's Liberation - Iran and the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq are confident that the proposed law by the French government is a step toward establishing a secular society. Secularism is one precondition for a free society and women's equality. The enforcement of this ban will be a first step towards this though it must be extended to include the banning of religious schools and the prohibition of child veiling. We must not allow religious extremism and political Islam to spread the rule of religion in society by means of intimidation, blackmail and threats. Religion must be relegated to a private matter. Religion must be separated from the state and educational system.

We invite all freedom loving individuals and organisations to join us in counter demonstrations on the same day in several countries, including England, Germany, Sweden and Norway.

**Demonstration in London:
Saturday 17/01/04
at 12:00
French Embassy
58 Knights Bridge
London SW1**

Nearest tube station: Knightsbridge

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The *alternative* press conference in Oslo



On Tuesday 9th December 03 a press conference was held in Oslo with Shirin Ebadi – the recipient of this year's Nobel Peace Prize. Simultaneously, outside the conference hall, we also held a press conference. Two conferences with two different aims.

In their conference, they portrayed the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Shirin Ebadi as honouring women's rights and human rights in Iran. In our conference, we talked about the Nobel Committee's branding of people with such marks as 'Muslim women' and 'Muslim world', and the destructive consequences of this for millions of people in countries afflicted with Islam.

In their conference, they talked about the compatibility of Islam and human rights. In our conference, we talked about Islam's open hostility towards human rights and women's rights.

In their conference, they offered a more delicate and tolerable image of Islamic government and political Islam. In our conference, the reactionary movement of political Islam and its countless crimes, especially in the last quarter century, in Iran and the world were exposed.

In their conference, they talked about appeasing and coming to terms with the Islamic regime in Iran and the possibility of reforming it. In our conference, we talked about the Islamic regime's hostility towards any form of human rights, the need to overthrow it and the revolution that is on the way.

The message of their conference was appeasement of the Islamic regime and its embellishment. Our conference carried the message of millions of people who abhor the Islamic regime; the message of the anti-religious and secularist movement in Iran and the Middle East; the message of workers, women and youth in Iran who are protesting against the Islamic Republic.

Organisation for Women's Liberation – Iran; Organisation of Women's Freedom – Iraq; Campaign in Defence of Women's Rights in Iran; Middle East Women's Rights Committee; The campaign Don't Forget Pila and Faduma!; International Committee Against Stoning; 17/11/03

An Open Letter to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee regarding Awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Shirin Ebadi

14 October 2003

Dear Committee members

As a veteran activist for women's equality, as one who has been the subject of the Islamic Republic of Iran's persecution and political Islam's brutality and has devoted her life to combat it, I would like to express my indignation at your statement regarding the awarding of the Noble peace prize to Ms. Shirin Ebadi.

It is said that she has been awarded the prize "for her efforts for democracy and human rights' especially for "the struggle for the rights of women and children." But further down in the statement the more specific reason for which she has been awarded the peace prize is given: "Ebadi is a conscious Moslem. She sees no conflict between Islam and fundamental human rights." It is further emphasized that the committee is awarding her the prize as "a woman who is part of the Moslem world."

The assumptions by the Nobel prize committee are objectionable by anyone who has lived through the horrors of the Islamic Republic of Iran, or has felt or seen the terror of political Islam in the past decades. This statement is a blow to a people whose aspirations are to bring about a secular state, and to free themselves from religion rule. One need not to be a seasoned politician to understand the implications and implied meanings of this sentence. For ordinary people in Iran who have witnessed the support given by the West to the Islamic Republic in one form or the other over the years, and have also witnessed their support for Islamic states and movements, the clear message of this statement reads that the Nobel peace prize is being awarded to a Moslem movement in the hopes of reforming the Islamic Republic.

For a committee whose main task is to follow, understand and discern the movements for improving people's lives, for improving human rights, women's rights, the rights of children, and any disadvantaged section of society, I am amazed that you have not followed the events in Iran, have not heard the message and slogans of the protest movements of the people, workers and women in Iran. The most recent one took place in June and continued for over three weeks. Every night, thousands took to the streets and shouted: "long live freedom and equality" and "down with Islamic Republic." As it regards women, they threw off their compulsory veils - some even burnt their Islamic veils - as signs of protest to Islamic laws, and broke the walls and laws of gender apartheid by holding hands with their male comrades and dancing in public. As a matter of fact as I am writing these lines, I

received the news of wave of demonstrations in the streets of Tehran, in which thousands of people, especially women are shouting "down with the Islamic Republic" and demanding freedom. Perhaps you could understand my indignation at your statement when you explain that you are awarding the prize to a "conscious Moslem" who "sees no conflict between Islam and fundamental human rights." In explaining the reasons for awarding a prize to a woman for her activities in the arena of women's rights in a country where women are considered by law, that is religious law, as second-class citizens, where the secular and women's equal rights movement are tremendously strong, why do you find the need or choose to describe her as a Moslem?

There is a clear political justification for portraying a women's rights activist from Iran, and under the tyranny of a religious state, first and foremost, by religion, and by describing the geography of her activities, again, by religion. This statement does not award the women's and protest movements in Iran fighting for a free and better world, a secular state, and the complete equality of women and men, but instead awards a section of a movement which is trying to maintain the rule of Islam. This statement, contrary to the demands and judgements of the people in Iran is awarding that movement which is more eager to stop the people than to stop the Islamic state, and religious tyranny in Iran. I believe one is justified to draw the conclusion that the Nobel prize committee is biased and has made a political decision to support not the secular movement in Iran, and the so-called "Moslem world" but the Islamic movement. Let me assure you that such a decision is contrary to the will and wishes of the majority of people and women of Iran who will free themselves and Iran of a religious state all together, and will bring about a secular, free and equal political system.

Sincerely yours,

Azar Majedi

Founder and Chairperson, Organisation of Women's Liberation in Iran; Chairperson, Middle East Centre for Women's Rights; Editor, Medusa, the Journal of the Centre for Women and Socialism azarmajedi@yahoo.com

Majedi



Azar

Our liberating vision will become the reality of tomorrow

Azar Majedi



At different times in history, the women's liberation movement has been strong and vibrant in various parts of the world. In the 19th century, Europe witnessed a flourishing equal rights movement. With the advent of capitalism, a women's liberation movement, and with it the women's question, were born. A dynamic movement, both theoretical and political, appeared in advanced countries. Then with the October revolution a strong and vibrant women's liberation movement came into being, which had long lasting effects. It moved the women's liberation movement into new areas and pushed the limits to a whole new height.

In the 60s and 70s, Europe and the US became the birthplace of a new era of the women's liberation movement. This movement changed the situation and status of women in the West. It changed the image of women, the way women were perceived by the society. It revolutionized the relations of women to men and motherhood, and had an important impact on the family structure and

the role of women within it. It was named the sexual revolution. We still have a long way to go. But this movement, or as it was called revolution took us to a whole new era and opened new doors for us.

Now, I believe the Middle East is entering a new phase, a new era and we could witness a revolution of similar dimensions and impact as in 1917 in Russia or during the 60s in the West. This movement has been born and is taking shape in Iran vis-à-vis political Islam; in its course of development, it will affect the whole region.

The growth of capitalism in Islam-ridden countries and the introduction of modernism began to affect women's rights and status in these traditional societies. The changes and the reforms were minor and gradual, but they were apparent and obvious. Women became more assertive, more active socially, and were becoming a part of the new society and pushing back traditions, which were mostly shaped by religion - that is Islam. These deeply patriarchal societies showed

some signs of modernism, and a breeze of new norms was being felt. Growing up as a young girl in this era, I could feel the breeze, and I was becoming part of this new move for change, questioning my position, demanding my rights, protesting at the shortcomings and perceptions of society, and ridiculing the norms and laws of patriarchy.

Soon a revolution took place in Iran, my birthplace, challenging the dictatorship, demanding freedom and justice. I was excited by the promises of a social and political transformation, which I thought and believed the revolution will bring about. But things took a different turn. The revolution was aborted in its dreams and aspirations, and instead of equality and freedom, a monster was born, what we later came to call political Islam. The birth of the Islamic Republic in Iran did not only turn the tide back in Iran, it had an adverse impact on the whole region. Along with this, political Islam was helped, supported, armed and trained by the USA and West in Afghanistan. Soon this monstrous movement poisoned the entire region. Its first victims were women. Women's rights and freedoms were among the first targets to be attacked and mutilated. A dark veil was thrown on women's existence. Their meagre economic independence was slashed; their new image was tainted before taking shape, and their sexual being was thrown back to the dark ages. And a continuous struggle was born.

I talk about Iran but in all the Islam-ridden countries this movement has taken its toll on the people, on women and their status, whether in the form of the state, as in Iran, Afghanistan, the Sudan and the like, or where it constitutes a strong movement such as in Algeria, Egypt and Palestine. And with the attack of the USA and Britain on Iraq, and the disarray resulting from this attack we are witnessing the same trend in Iraq. In the past two and half decades a

movement has sprung up and taken shape in Iran, which is continuously gaining momentum and strength. In my opinion, this movement will soon be regarded as one of its kind in the history of great social movements and women's liberation movements in the world. This movement is questioning and challenging all the traditional and patriarchal norms and laws. The movement to free women in Iran is challenging not only women's position in the society and family, but is also attacking the whole political system and prevalent outmoded traditions. This great social movement has wide-reaching effects on the society as a whole. The women's movement is a great force against patriarchal relations, a great force for secularism, a force for a more just and freer society.

The effects and impact of this movement goes far beyond the borders of its birthplace. It is already affecting the struggle against political Islam in the region and once it succeeds in its aims, once it is able to materialize its aspirations, it will revolutionize the status and image of women in the region. Just as political Islam takes its first victims among women, the movement to liberate women is a staunch enemy of political Islam.

The political force of the women's movement against the Islamic Republic of Iran and thereby against political Islam is so immense that its impact was felt internationally when the Noble Peace Prize was recently awarded to "a Moslem woman" "who sees no conflict between Islam and human rights", to "a woman from the Moslem world," per the Nobel Prize Committee statement. Why did they feel the need to remind us more than once in a brief statement that they are awarding a Moslem; that her actions for the defence of women's rights have been within the framework of and with all respect to Islam? Because this is an orchestrated and coordinated political project by the European Union to find a new

balance for political Islam, to try and create a so-called moderate Moslem force vis-à-vis a radical and militant movement which is taking shape in Iran and is daily gaining momentum. A force, which will not only stop at brushing off the excesses of Islamic rule, but will dismantle the whole system and will bring about a new one based on respect for freedom and equality of all, in which women and men will live as equal partners.

This brings me to the role played by a strong movement which has been quick in recognizing the monster of political Islam, and relentless in its fight to challenge the old order and for freedom and equality. A movement with a clear vision and well thought out plan of action, and an uncompromising stand against injustice, suppression and inequality, Worker-communism. This movement has brought hopes for a better world, a humane world, a just and free world. Here I would like to pay tribute to a great man whose insight and vision made all this possible - Mansoor Hekmat, the leader of the Worker-communist movement and party, a man whose vision for a free and equal society mobilised this great force.

We are gathered here today to strengthen our force, to refresh our energy in our struggle against the oppression of women, and to announce to the world that we will continue our fight to bring about women's liberation and full equality. We will not tire. We will not stop. We have worked hard to build a strong movement, and we are proud of it. We will make our voices heard. We will materialize our aspirations. We will make sure that the dark force of reaction and the monster of political Islam become yesterday's nightmares and that our liberating vision will become the reality of tomorrow.

Long Live Women's Liberation!

The above is a speech made in English at the 3rd Medusa Conference in Stockholm, Sweden in November 2003.

“If you live under an Islamic regime in a region where political Islam is terrorizing women and you defend Islam, then you are defending political Islam,” said Azar Majedi, founder and chairperson of the London-based Organization of Women’s Liberation in Iran, who helped organize the protests in Oslo. “You cannot stop this kind of regime with these kind of niceties.”

From: The New York Times

Iranian receives prize and issues rebuke

Oslo: The Iranian lawyer Shirin Ebadi received the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize here Wednesday, declaring that the prize would inspire women across the Muslim world to fight for equality in oppressive, patriarchal societies.. But Ebadi, who has represented political prisoners and the victims of political violence in Iran, avoided sharp criticism of the Islamic government there and delivered her most pointed rebuke instead to the United States for what she called human rights abuses carried out in the name of the war on terrorism.. “Some states have violated the universal principles and laws of human rights by using the events of September 11 and the war on international terrorism as a pretext,” she said.. “Regulations restricting human rights and basic freedoms, special bodies and extraordinary courts, which make fair adjudication difficult and at times impossible, have been justified and given legitimacy under the cloak of terrorism,” she added, making a reference to the U.S. detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where hundreds of suspected Al Qaeda members have been held for nearly two years.. Many Iranian exiles have complained that by awarding the prize to a woman working within the legal system in Iran, the Nobel Foundation is supporting political Islam over a secular alternative in the country. Indeed, the Iranian government has



taken the opportunity of Ebadi’s prize to showcase recent reforms and put the best possible light on the position held by women there. Following the award ceremony, Iran’s female vice president for the environment, Massoumeh Ebtekar, appeared on CNN to congratulate Ebadi and extol the advances of women in Iran. Ebtekar is better known to many people in the West as the official interpreter and spokeswoman of the militants who took American hostages in 1979 at the American Embassy in Tehran. Ebadi is the first Muslim woman to be given the prize, which has been awarded annually for 102 years. The Norwegian Nobel Committee, which picks the winners, made it clear that this year’s award was meant to send the message that Islam is not necessarily incompatible with democracy and human rights. “We felt it important to relate to human rights in the Muslim world, but wanted to avoid demonizing Islam,” said Geir Lundestad, the committee’s executive director. But Ebadi has come under attack by many Iranian opposition figures abroad who see

her as an apologist for political Islam. The chant of protesters has followed her around the few Oslo blocks where the Nobel festivities take place. **“If you live under an Islamic regime in a region where political Islam is terrorizing women and you defend Islam, then you are defending political Islam,” said Azar Majedi, founder and chairperson of the London-based Organization of Women’s Liberation in Iran, who helped organize the protests in Oslo. “You cannot stop this kind of regime with these kind of niceties.”**

In her speech, Ebadi offered oblique criticism of Iran’s conservative Islamic government, saying that, “some Muslims, under the pretext that democracy and human rights are not compatible with Islamic teachings and the traditional structure of Islamic societies, have justified despotic governments.” She warned the United States and other Western governments that have “prescribed war and military intervention for this region” against meddling in Iran’s affairs. “If you consider international human rights laws, including a nation’s right to determine its own destiny, to be universal, and if you believe in the priority and superiority of parliamentary democracy over other political systems, then you cannot think only of your own security and comfort, selfishly and contemptuously,” Ebadi said..



she was woken up early in the morning to be told that she was going to be hanged that day.

Help us save Kobra Rahmanpour



Demonstration in Sweden last week as part of the international campaign to save Kobra.

Kobra Rahmanpour is a 22 year old woman, currently under the threat of being hanged by the Islamic regime of Iran. She had spent the past three years in prison and been convicted of murdering her mother in law by a kitchen knife. On the first of January this year she was woken up early in the morning to be told that she was going to be hanged that day. But the execution did not take place that day and it has been set to be carried out in two months time. So we have got less than two months to save her now.

Kobra herself is a victim of poverty and injustice. She was born and raised in a family that could not even provide the mere necessities of life for its members. Her father is elderly and one of her brothers is disabled and there is no welfare system to look after such people who are in need. Kobra had to give up her ambitions of going to university, and in order to help her family survive, married a man 40 years her senior. But her life did not get better; in fact it was made hell by repeated maltreatment and abuse she received from her husband and his family.

In one occasion he was even arrested and imprisoned for physically and sexually abusing her. In the last incident according to Kobra, she was attacked by her mother in law with a kitchen knife in her hand. Kobra

claims that she killed her mother in law in a self defence act.

Kobra Rahmanpour's life and misery is not unique. She is one of thousands and even millions of young people in particular young women whose lives, youth and ambitions are ruined in the hands of Islamic regime. The Iranian authorities are not fit to prosecute someone like Kobra. They themselves are the worst criminals in the world. They should be tried for the terrible hell they have created for people in Iran.

Execution for whatever reason is an inhuman act and the Iranian government has got a record in this filed. For the sake of justice we must save Kobra Rahmanpour.

Help us in our campaign to make Iranian authorities withdraw the hanging sentence of Kobra!

Write protest letters to Iranian authorities and send us a copy.

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami
Email: khatami@president.ir Fax: 0098 21 649 5880

CC: Amnesty International Email: amnestyis@amnesty.org

European Union Email: civis@europarl.eu.int

ICDWRI Email: parvinkaboli@yahoo.se

The International Campaign in Defence of Women's Rights in Iran www.irandwr.org
2004-01-05

Our aims

Women's freedom is the measure of freedom in society. There is still a great deal left to accomplish in order to eliminate inequality between men and women, not only in Iran where misogyny brutally rules, but in the most advanced societies as well. The Organisation for Women's Liberation (OWL) sees itself as part of the immense historical and international struggle for women's liberation.

The OWL's aim is the unconditional liberation of women and complete equality between women and men in Iran. The OWL, therefore, must fight for the following demands:

- 1- *Complete equal rights for women and men; abolition of discriminatory laws, particularly laws in relation to family, marriage, divorce, and parental responsibility, for children;*
- 2- *Abolition of compulsory veiling and freedom of dress;*
- 3- *Complete abolition of segregation;*
- 4- *Access to equal resources in education, employment, sports and cultural activities;*
- 5- *Separation of religion from the state and education.*

“Headscarves, secularism and the battle of Democracy”

President Jacques Chirac of France announced on December 17/ 2003 that legislation would be introduced to implement the recommendations of a commission on secularism that reported back a week earlier. Its main thrust is to ban “ostensible” religious and political symbols in all state schools - most notably the Muslim headscarf, or hijab. What should be the attitude of the left? Should we stand for the right of Muslim women to wear a symbol of their religious convictions, or welcome the ban as a defense of secularism and the separation of church and state? Come along and debate the issues.

Speakers:

- **Peter Manson** (editor, *Weekly Worker*);
- **Houzan Mahmoud** (Worker Communist Party of Iraq and editor in chief of *Equal Rights Now!*, official paper of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq);
- **Terry Liddle** (Socialist Secular Society - personal capacity). Speakers invited from Workers Fight (fraternal organization of French left group, Lutte Ouvrière) and the Progressive Muslim Network.

Sunday, January 18 - 6pm.

Diorama Arts Centre, 34 Osnaburgh Street, London NW1 (nearest tubes Regents Park or Great Portland Street)



Related links:

Women in the Middle East
www.middleeastwomen.org

Medusa, Journal of Women and Socialism
www.medusa2000.com

The Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq
www.equalityiniraq.com

International Committee against Stoning
www.stopstoningnow.com

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Financial contributions

We need your support and donations. Please send your contributions to the following bank account and let us know by email. We urge all individuals and organisations to help us in our efforts to make a difference in the lives of women in Iran.

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