



8th March in Iran

8th March meeting in the city of sannandaj

Bravery and progressive demands

Maryam Kousha

To sum up what happened on 8th March 2004 in Iran, one could say bravery and progressive demands. Thousands of women all over the country celebrated International Women's Day, despite the suppressive measures taken by the Islamic government officials. Women took to the streets, parks, and attended public meetings in defiance of a ban enforced on them and threats made against them. There is no freedom of assembly or organisation in Iran. Any attempt to organise such gatherings faces armed attack, arrests and imprisonment. To top

it up, the demonstrators were given a "calendar" warning too! As it happened 8th march fell on the month of Ramadan, when according to Islamic Sharia law, you are not supposed to celebrate! That gave yet another incentive to women in Iran to attend meetings even in greater numbers. So much for "compatibility" of Islam and women's rights! The fact that this day is announced, let alone publicly celebrated in itself shows the demise of religion and its government. It also shows the determination of women's movement to brush aside all obsta-

cles to achieve its goals.

The main activities took part in the cities of Tehran, Sannandaj, Paveh, Sagez, Sardasht, and Gazvin. In Tehran, hundreds of people, mainly women gathered in the Laleh Park. They were attacked by armed forces and several people were arrested. The crowd confronted the guards and chanted, "Down with sexual apartheid", "Condemn violence", "Discriminatory laws must be abolished", "Women's rights must be upheld",



“Kobra Rahmanpour must be freed”,
“Long live freedom”.

The city of Sannandaj was full of life on 8th March. A massive meeting was organised in the city’s main sports centre, where speeches were made about the history of 8th march and a resolution was read out which was received by cheers from the public. An atmosphere of celebration was created by music and cultural activities.

In the city of Gazvin, a meeting was held in the central library where speakers talked about violence against women, honour killings and demanded an end to these atrocities. A special focus was made demanding abolition of capital punishment and freedom of Kobra Rahmanpour.

In Paveh and Saghez meetings were held where speakers talked about the history of women’s struggle for freedom. In Saghez, the officials threatened the celebrations. However people made everybody aware of the day by hanging huge banners in the city centre and from the bridges. Despite all suppressive efforts by the government officials, this day was celebrated by cultural activities and distribution of newsletters and sweets!



8th March gathering in Laleh Park- Tehran/Iran



Armed forces intimidating the demonstrators in Tehran

Resolution

8th March 2004 Sannandaj/Iran

8th march is the International day for millions of freedom loving people. On this day, Women’s movement declares its verdict against a world full of suppression, violence, violation of rights and freedoms, and discrimination. It is the day when women show their protest against capitalism that is the main cause of human suffering.

We, women and men present here today, together with millions of protesting women and men all over the world state our demands and our endeavour to achieve them:

- 1- Equal rights of women and men in all aspects of social, economic and political activities of the society;
- 2- Abolition of all male chauvinist and discriminatory laws;
- 3- Equal wage for equal work for all women and men;
- 4- Introduction of welfare, state pension, and unemployment benefits, and equal rights for housewives;
- 5- Condemnation of stoning, honour killings and all sorts of violence against women;
- 6- We support the current strikes by teachers, workers and students for their just demands.
- 7- We condemn sexual apartheid.

Long Live 8th March

8th March is our day!



*Parvin Kaboli,
Representative
of Organisa-
tion for
Women's
Liberation-
Iran*



Speech made by Parvin Kaboli on 8th march 2004 in Gothenburg, Sweden. Parvin spoke to a crowd of 3000 people attending the International Women's Day demonstration.

8th March is our day. It is a day for men and women who have strived for the necessity of a change in the society. A day of unity in the streets, or underground meetings. It is a day for us to struggle in order to overcome our suppression. 8th March is a day when we once again witness a living historical message. A message from the past but interlinked with the lives of millions of people today. A day when we witness people's struggle for gender equality and freedom. 8th March is a day for an international struggle against the roots of women's suppression in the society. It is a day of protest against everything that reproduces women's suppression including all customs, convictions, morals and traditions, which are in contradiction to women's rights. 8th March is the day when we are reminded that gender discrimination is one of the bases of the present system, which is alien to people's nature and therefore must be uprooted.

Capitalism reproduces itself, amongst others, through gender discrimination. In the West, gender discrimination is in the work place, at home and in the society. In the Middle East and North Africa, it takes Islam as a political alternative to leave women as victims of religious barbarity, and violates their basic human rights.

Let us talk about the situation of women in Sweden. Since the 80s, the welfare state has been in a state of collapse, thanks to the right wing policies, including that of the Social Democrats, dominating the society. Cut downs have made the wage gap between the sexes even bigger and the economic situation worst for the weak. Women are the first to feel and suffer the burden.

The result of such policies has led to lower standards of health, depression and weakening of women's position in the society. We must not forget how the Public Workers Union's fight for higher wages was bashed behind closed doors. We must not forget that sexual abuse against women is on the rise. Women trafficking has become more or less a common event. In courts, the victim's clothing, drinking and sexual habits are considered as reasons to justify a crime. With this background, Tore Norberg (Solicitor) made history by calling a partner a "whore"! There are so many ways to become famous, aren't there?!

Such a situation demands an action from us, from the women's movement. We need our Rosa Luxemburg, Alexandra Kolontie. We need to shake off the obstacles, which stop us from our fight for women's liberation in Sweden. A social-

ist movement that secures women's demands and unity.

Last but not least, as an activist of the progressive women's movement in the Middle East, I must emphasize that we need solidarity in our fight against political Islam that has ruined the life of millions of women in countries like Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq. In Iraq, the occupying forces are helping the tribal and religious forces to build a state based on religion, ethnic differences and tribal values. Such plans must be exposed and stopped. Talibans of the world are still ruling. They must be pushed back and out of women's lives.

The Iranian government consolidates its position with the help of the Western governments. They try to stand in the way of the secular movement. A movement that is demanding freedom and equality. Help us to change the situation for the better. A better world where people's interests are in the centre. Our slogan on 8th March, the International Women's Day should be: Solidarity and an total unconditional equality between men and women all over the world.

Long live 8th March!

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8th March

Organisation for Women's Liberation (OWL)-abroad



8th march demonstration in Gothenburg, Sweden



Germany. The banner reads Long Live 8th March, International Women's Day. Organisation for Women's Liberation



Germany



Homa arjomand, Organiser of the Toronto Conference

Report compiled by Maryam Kousha

One would think women in Iran who face political Islam and male dominated society and values everyday of their lives, have a lot to protest about. True, however, what we are facing outside Iran in some respect is not any better! We are witnessing the influence of political Islam and crimes and violence committed against women right here in Europe and North America. So OWL cannot rest for a moment. The struggle for women's emancipation does not have borders.

Setting up of Sharia Courts in Canada, honour killings in Europe in families from Islamic backgrounds, violence against women, and religious symbols at schools are all important issues that have been tackled and opposed by OWL on 8th March this year. Separation of religion from state, equal rights and liberation of women from backward traditions and any sort of suppression is our common goal internationally. OWL has been in the forefront of this important secular movement in Europe and North America.

OWL had its main 8th March conference in Frankfurt, Germany. OWL's activists Mina Ahadi, Soheila Sharifi were the main speakers at this conference. They talked about the situation of women in Iran under the rule of Islamic Republic of Iran, and the extensive campaigns organised to gain support for women's movement in Iran. The speakers' main message was that women's movement is a political movement, because their suppression and inferior position in the present society is consolidated by governments that defend a political agenda.

OWL was invited to a conference on 8th March in Toronto to discuss the issue of setting up of Islamic Sharia Courts in Canada. Azar Majedi spoke on behalf of OWL. She emphasized the irrelevance and suppressive nature of such a policy in Canada and how people are opposed to the idea. There was a lively debate between the panellists who were from different organisations and affiliations. The main debate was between Azar Majedi, Maryam Namazi in opposition to Dr Sheik and Farzaneh. The 2 latter

spoke in defence of Islamic laws and values about women such as the right of men to hit their wives in an act of punishing and “protecting” them, and the 2 former (Azar and Maryam) panellists argued that there is no justification for having different rules and laws for “minority” women. This is nothing short of racism. They emphasized that Islamic laws are against women’s rights and the notion that women choose to follow these rules is misleading. The rights of many women in the so-called minority communities are being violated. The audience participation and other panellists (Azam Kamguan, Homa Arjomand, Sheila Ayala, Fatemola and Alia Hogben) provided an excellent opportunity for challenging discussions.

In Denmark, Nahid Ryazi represented OWL in several meetings and demonstrations. Nahid was one of the speakers invited to a meeting organised by OWL, two Danish Parliamentary parties Enhedelisten and SF. She spoke of the situation of women refugees who enter the country as “postal brides” and face many hardships. She criticized the Danish government’s refugee policy regarding the faith of these women. Once in Denmark they are at the mercy of their husbands. Their refugee status is dependent on their husband’s decision. Many women endure violence at home, because their refugee status will be revoked if they divorce. By not regarding their cases as individuals, the Danish government in effect is being indifferent to violence against women. Nahid was also interviewed by many mainstream newspapers in Denmark, explaining the situation of women in Iran and Denmark.

In Sweden several meetings and demonstrations were organised. In Gothenburg Parvin Kaboli, the representative of OWL spoke at two rallies about the struggle of women in Iran for freedom, and the importance of this day in Sweden. Galavigh Mostafa Pour, a woman’s activist was amongst other speakers at the 8th march celebrations in Gothenburg. She spoke of the strength of women’s movement in Iran against sexual apartheid. Halaleh Taheri spoke in defense of Kobra Rahmanpour and her freedom.

8th march

A message from Iraq



**Yanar Mohammed,
chairperson of
Organisation for
Women’s Freedom
in Iraq**

Confronting US led coalition and Islamic groups in Iraq. Not an easy job!

Dear Friends

I wish a happy International Women’s Day to all. Our celebration in Baghdad was a most positive one and also determined to change the dark post-war scenario into a bright egalitarian one. Although burdened by veil, insecurity and deprivation, almost a thousand demonstrator (mostly women) gathered in Al Fardawse square to demand secularism.

While the Governing Council convened to sign a constitution that jeopardizes the lives of millions of Iraqi women, OWFI activists and members announced to the whole world that they will not recognize a constitution that is mainly based on religion.

March 8 is our IWD and we will not agree to change it into a newly-invented Islamic day that isolates Iraqi women from the International women’s movement.

Please open the attachment in order to meet the wonderful women featuring and also leading our IWD in Baghdad.

In Solidarity
Yanar Mohammed

Chairperson of Organisation of Women’s Freedom in Iraq
Editor in Chief of Al Mousawat (Equality) Newspaper
www.equalityiniraq.com

Top 5 Reasons to Show your Solidarity with Iraqi Women

1. Women are human beings. Our rights are not up for debate. As Organization of Women's Freedom declares in their founding statement, "Women's freedom is the measure of freedom and humanity in society. Not only in Iraq, where women endure the most severe types of discrimination and injustice, but also in the more developed countries in the world today. The realization of full equality among women and men still requires continuous struggle and serious and rapid steps.

2. The U.S. must be held accountable for turning back the the clock on Iraqi women's rights. Since U.S military occupation in Iraq, women have lost basic human rights which they struggled for and won 50 years ago. Though Saddam Hussein brutally repressed the radical movements which achieved these gains, women in Iraq still retained many more rights than other women in the Middle East. The US destruction of Iraqi society and promotion of Islamic forces has emboldened the most reactionary and right wing elements of the society. Men in Iraq are able to walk freely in the streets, but many women are afraid to leave their homes without a close male relative due to the widespread abduction, rape and increased incidence of honor killings."

3. Iraqi women have risen up in protest to defend and demand their rights; they need our support. For the past year, Iraqi women, led by the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) have been protesting assaults against women and fighting the US attempts to turn over power to

Islamic fundamentalists. The defeat of Resolution 137 (Islamic Shar'ia) by massive women's protests demonstrates that Iraqi women do not want to live under religious rule. OWFI demands a secular constitution that recognizes full equality for women.

4. The U.S. Government covers up its support for theocracy with claims of democracy. The Bush administration hand-picked the Iraqi Governing Council members, and advocates Islamic law as a "source" for the new constitution in Iraq. This would eliminate women's rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance, legal representation, and legalize death by stoning for adultery. As U.S. citizens and residents, we must hold our government accountable for the escalating human rights crisis facing Iraqi women and support women's struggle for true democracy and liberation.

5. Sexism is not intrinsic to anyone's "culture." Oppression of women is a tool used in cultures worldwide to control our bodies, our labor and our fundamental right to freedom. We must answer the call of women at home and internationally, to eradicate sexism wherever it exists. An injury to one is an injury to all.

Solidarity with Organization for Womens Freedom in Iraq/March 3, 2004

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Activities in defence of Secularism in Europe

The debate on the question of Secularism and a ban on religious symbols at schools in Europe has been one of the most talked about issues in the UK during the past few days. Following the successful and well attended meeting in Paris on 5th Feb in defence of a ban on religious symbols in schools and governmental institutions in France, the Organisation for Women's Liberation (OWL) has attended many more debates reiterating its view on children's rights, women's rights and separation of religion from state.

Azar Majedi, Chairperson of OWL, was interviewed in a programme shown on BBC channel 4 on 10th February, criticizing the reasons behind the Noble Peace Prize Committee's decision to awarding the Noble Peace prize to Shirin Ebadi, and the political consequences of this award in undermining women's rights in Iran. A clip from the demonstration in Oslo where Azar Majedi, Mina Ahadi and Ali Javadi were amongst the speakers of the rally was also shown.

Maryam Namazi, member of OWL, was one of the participants in the BBC TV debate programme of "Heaven and Earth" on Sunday 15th February. She spoke of secularism in the society in general, focusing on children's rights and the issue of banning religious symbols in schools.

Azar Majedi was invited to take part in a discussion on BBC Asian Network radio on 18th February to discuss the case of a young girl (Shabina) in Luton who has not attended school for two years, because she has been told by the head teacher that she can not wear her long Hejab dress. The veil, secularism, banning of religious symbols at schools, and the role of the government in safeguarding children's rights was among the topics of discussion. Azar Majedi also made a critical point about the fact that the British government should have acted more responsibly over the 2 years during which Shabina had not attended school to make sure all obstacles are removed so she can continue her studies.

Maryam Namazi, was one of the guest con-

tributors in the Panel discussion on Radio BBC on 19th February where a lively debate with guests with different views on secularism and separation of religion from state took place. Maryam Namazi talked about how secularism in fact unifies people and contrary to the general belief it provides conditions where by people are regarded according to their human attributes rather than their religious beliefs. She also defended banning of religious symbols and teachings at schools as one of the main ways of defending children's rights.

Mina Ahadi, OWL-representative abroad was invited by the Persian language TV (Rangarang) to discuss the Islamic laws (including stoning) and its impact on women's lives in Iran. A section was devoted to the secularist movement outside Iran and the issue of banning religious symbols at schools. Mina defended the ban and argued that religion is the private matter of people and that separation of religion from state means that all religious symbols must be banned from schools and state run institutions.

Our sister organisation in Iraq, The **Organisation for Women's Equality-Iraq** headed by **Yanar Mohammed** has been at the centre of some major political debates and battles recently. Yanar Mohammed who is a well known women's activist in Iraq has for many months tried to criticize and push back the Islamic groups in Iraq. Only last week she was threatened to death by these groups. An international campaign in her defence has already started. A demonstration took place in Baghdad on 18th February in defence of women's rights, Yanar Mohammed's life and against the attempts by the Islamic groups to introduce Islamic Sharia law in Iraq. Yanar Mohammed was interviewed by the BBC radio. In her interview, Yanar said, the Islamic groups try to implement their reactionary laws in Iraq, but we will not allow that to happen.



Azar Majedi



Maryam Namazi



Mina Ahadi



Y. Mohammed

What has bon-fire celebrations got to do with Islamic veil?

The last Wednesday of the Iranian calendar (17th March) is traditionally the day when people celebrate the coming of the New Year by setting bon-fire in the streets. This year the celebrations turned into a political show of discontent and hatred for the Islamic laws and values in many cities (Tabriz, Sannandaj, Khoramshahr, Isfahan, Shiraz, Lahijan, Shahinshahr). Many

women took off their veils (Hejab) and hand in hand with men danced the night away.

It is a political act because it defies the core of backward Islamic values in two ways. One is that women demonstrated they do not submit to oppression and that they hate the veil, and second men and women ignored sexual apartheid rule by staging a celebration where both sexes

publicly interacted.

If a simple celebration gives the opportunity and "excuse" for throwing away the veil, the visible symbol of suppression of women by political Islam, just imagine what one day without the rule of Islamic Republic would do to the high aspirations of women's movement in Iran!

Maryam Kousha

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.*

Public meeting in Iraq

No to Women's Slavery in Iraq
No to Islamic Law
Yes to Equality Law in Iraq

The Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq will hold a lecture regarding the Governing Council resolution 137 that forwards the Islamic Shariaa laws instead of the current Personal Status Law. The Lecture will include an indepth review of all social and political consequences in establishing and legalizing slavery of women in the Iraqi society.

The lecture will be directed by:

Yanar Mohammed

Chairperson of Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq

Place: Baghdad – Al Aqik Hotel & Restaurant- next to The National Theatre

Time: Thursday, 2004-01-26, at 1:00 p.m.

Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq OWFI

Related links:

Women in the Middle East

www.middleeastwomen.org

The Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq

www.equalityiniraq.com

Medusa, Journal of Women and Socialism

www.medusa2000.com

International Committee against Stoning

www.stopstoningnow.com

The Organisation for Women's Liberation-Iran

www.azadizan.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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