

# Discovering Iran. Women's Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#)

Iran Trip: September – October 2014

*Marcel Proust said: "The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." During the past two decades, I visited Iran on numerous occasions staying 10-14 days at a time. This time around, I stayed for 2 months and heeding Proust, I carried with me a fresh pair of eyes. I discarded both my Western lenses as well as my Iranian lenses and observed with objective eyes. It was a formidable journey that left me breathless.*

## Part I – Women of the Islamic Republic of Iran

It is hard to know where to start a travel log and how to describe a newfound world in a few pages. However, given the obsession with the status of women, it is perhaps appropriate to start with the women in Iran as I perceived them.

Western media with help from feminists and Iranians living outside of Iran portray Iranian women as being "oppressed" — foremost because women in Iran have to abide by an Islamic dress code – hijab. Yes, hijab is mandatory and women choose to either wear either a chador or to wear a scarf. But what is crucial to understand is the role chador played in pre 1979 versus the post Revolution era.

Prior to the 1979 Revolution, the chador was indicative of a thinly veiled caste system. While a few distinguished women of high socio-economical background chose to wear the chador, the rest, the majority of Iranian women, were simply born into the habit. In short, the socio-economically disadvantaged wore the pre 1979 chador. In those days, the chador was a hindrance to a woman's progress; she was looked down at and frowned upon. She could not move forward or up. She was oppressed. But Western feminists were blind to this oppression. After all, the Shah was modern and America's friendly dictator.

The Revolution changed the status quo and chipped away at the caste system. A revolution, by definition, is a complete change in the way people live and work. And so it is with the Iranian Revolution. The post 1979 chador is no longer an impediment to a woman's future. Today's Iranian woman, the same (formerly) less privileged class, has found freedom in her chador. She has been unshackled and she marches on alongside her (formerly) more privileged colleague. This emancipation is what the Western/Westernized feminists see as oppression.

I myself come from yesterday's tiny minority of "privileged" women, far too comfortable in my "Western" skin to want to promote hijab, but I will not allow my personal preferences to

diminish the value of the progress made *because* of hijab. The bleeding hearts from without should simply change their tainted lenses instead of trying to change the lives of others for Iranian women do not need to be rescued, they do not follow – they lead.

On two separate occasions I had the opportunity to sit and talk with a group of PhD students at Tehran University's Global Studies Department. Frankly, these young women charmed me. Their inquisitive and sharp minds, their keen intellect, their vast knowledge, their fluent English, and their utter confidence dazzled me. Western feminists would consider them "oppressed". Seems to me that feminism needs rescuing, not Iranian women.

The inordinate success of women goes vastly beyond education; they participate in every aspect of society: motherhood, arts and sciences, high tech, film and cinema, research, business, administration, politics, sports, armed forces, bus and taxi drivers, fire-fighters, etc. Women's active role in society is undeniable. What I found tantalizing was their role as cultural gatekeepers.

### Women – The Cultural Warriors

Cultural imperialism is part and parcel of neocolonialism. The eradication of an indigenous culture and replacing it with a hegemonic one enables the hegemon to exert influence on the subject nation – to own it. And women are the nuclei. They hold the family together and pass on traditions. To this end, in every colonial adventure, regardless of geography, women have been the primary targets (i.e. victims of rescue). Iran has been no different. While some have indeed abandoned their culture in order to embrace that of another, the vast majority have resisted and fought back with authentic Iranian tradition.

One group of these cultural warriors left a deep impact on me. I attended a dance ensemble at the famous Roudaki Hall (Talar Roudaki). Girls aged 6 to 18 sent the packed hall into a thunderous applause when they danced to various traditional songs from around the country. Their dance was not MTV stuff. It reflected the beauty and purity of an ancient culture. Their movements and gestures were not intended to be seductive, they were graceful and poetic ushering in the ancient past and bonding it with the present, strengthening it. These were the women of Iran who would guard Iran's precious culture and traditions against modern, Western culture deemed central to 'civilization' and 'freedom' by Western feminists.

It is not my intention to give the false impression that every woman in Iran is happy, successful, and valued. Like any other society, Iran has its share of unhappy, depressed girls and women. It has its share of women who have been abused and betrayed. It has its share of girls and women who turn to drugs, prostitution, or both. I came across these as well. I also noted that laws in Iran do not favor women, be it divorce, child custody, or inheritance. Yet women have leapt forward.

### Part II – Esprit de Corps

#### Washington Just Doesn't Get It

Numerous visitors have travelled to Iran and brought back reports describing the landscape, the food, the friendliness of the people, the impact of the sanctions, and so forth. For the most part, these reports have been accurate — albeit incomplete. I do not want to tire the reader with my observations on these same topics; rather, I invite the reader to share my

journey into the soul of the country – the spirit of the Iranian nation.

Washington's missteps are, in part, due to the simple fact that Washington receives flawed intelligence on Iran and Iranians. This has been a long-standing pattern with Washington. Prior to the 1979 Revolution, a plethora of US personnel lived in Iran. Thousands of CIA agents were stationed there. Their task went beyond teaching torture techniques to the Shah's secret police; they were, after all, spies. In addition to the military personnel that came in tow with the military equipment sold to the Shah by the U.S., there were official US personnel who worked at the American Embassy in Tehran. None got it.

They all failed miserably in their assessment of Iranians. These personnel were simply too busy enjoying a lavish lifestyle in Iran. As the aforementioned travellers have all repeated, Iran is beautiful, the food scrumptious, the people hospitable. These personnel attended parties thrown by those close to the Shah (or other affluent Iranians) and lived the kind of life they could not have dreamt of elsewhere. American ambassadors doled out visas to the lazy kids of these same families who would not have otherwise been able to make it to the US under normal student visa requirements.

These same Iranians, the privileged elite, provided Americans in Iran with intelligence – inaccurate, flawed information that was passed onto Washington. Washington was content. After all, why doubt your friends, and how could possibly the secret police trained by CIA not get the facts right? To this end, Washington believed Iran would remain a client state for the unforeseen future. The success of the revolution was a slap in the face, but Washington did not alter course.

For the past several decades, Washington has continued to act on flawed intelligence. Today, it relies on the "expertise" of some in the Iranian Diaspora who have not visited Iran once since the revolution. In addition to the "Iran experts", Washington has found itself other sources of 'intelligence', foremost; the Mojahedeen Khalg (MEK) terrorist cult. This group feeds Washington information provided them by Israel. Previous to this assignment, the cult was busy fighting alongside Saddam Hossein killing Iranians and Kurds. Is it any surprise that Washington is clueless on Iran.

What Washington can't fathom is the source of Iran's strength, its formidable resilience. Thanks to its 'experts', and the personal experience of some visitors, Washington continues to believe that the Iranian people love America and that they are waiting for Washington to 'rescue' them from their government. No doubt Iranians are generous, hospitable, and charming. They welcome visitors as guest regardless of their country of origin. This is part and parcel of their culture. They also believe a guest is a 'blessing from God' — *mehmoon barekate khodast. Karime khodast*. But this is where it ends.

While the Iranian people love people of all nationalities, including Americans, they see Washington for what it is. Over the past decades, Washington and its policies have adversely affected virtually every single family in Iran. These include those whose dreams and hopes were shattered by the CIA orchestrated coup against their nascent democracy and its popular leader, Mossadegh. Later, lives were turned upside down the Shah's CIA/Mossad trained secret police arrested, brutally tortured, killed or simply made disappear anyone who dared venture into politics. Thanks to America's staunch support, these stories never found their way to the papers. And then there are the millions of war widows and orphans, the maimed soldiers, the victims of chemical weapons supplied to Saddam Hossein by America to use against Iranians while the UN closed its eyes in an 8-year war. Not to

forget the victims of American sponsored terrorism, and sanctions. Millions of Iranians have first hand experience of all that has been plagued upon them by Washington.

It is these victims, their families and acquaintances that fight for Iran's sovereignty, that are the guardians of this proud nation. They are the source of Iran's strength. Victor Hugo once said: "No army can withstand the strength of an idea whose time has come." There simply is no army on earth which can occupy, by proxy or otherwise, the land the people have come to believe belongs to them not by virtue of birth, but because they have fought for it, died for it, kept it from harm.

I met many such families; one in particular was more memorable. During the Shah's regime, this family worked on my father's farm. The father and his sons worked the farm and the mother helped around the house. In those days, this family and future generations would have simply continued to work on the farm, remain 'peasants' with no prospects for the future. But the revolution rescued them.

Shortly after the revolution, the war started. The boys in the family all went to war. One uncle lost his life to chemical warfare. The rest survived – and thrived. They got themselves free education provided by the same government America wants to dislodge.

One of these boys, the man I met after some 35 years, Kazem, once condemned to be a 'peasant', had become a successful businessman. I spent hours talking to the family and to Kazem in particular. What impressed me was not just his affluence and his success in business, but the wisdom that only comes with age, and yet he had acquired it in youth. He had intellect and dignity. A gentleman, I found his knowledge of global affairs to be superior to most one would meet at a college in the US. He had experienced war and witnessed death. Iran belonged to him. He would fight for it over and over without hesitating to die for it.

This is the Iran the Diaspora has left behind, the Iran that is unknown to them. This is a far superior country than the one I left behind as a child and visited throughout the years. Iran's guardians, its keepers, are all Kazems. It has been said that the strength of an army is the support of the people behind it. The whole country is that army. As Khalil Gibran rightly observed: "Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars." With every wrong policy, America adds to the scars, strengthens the character and spirit of this unbreakable nation. This is what Washington is not able to grasp.

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