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Iran: Amnesty International supports calls for gender equality as activists arrested and discrimination is entrenched

Amnesty International has signed up to support a call for freedom and gender equality made by Iranian women's rights activists ahead of International Women's Day on 8 March 2010 (<http://www.irangenderequality.com/>). The activists leading this initiative are asking organizations and individuals outside Iran to echo their call and to act as a voice when their own are silenced through repression.

Discrimination against women in law and practice

Although in February 2010 Iran ostensibly agreed to guarantee equality for women in law during the review of Iran's record by the UN Human Rights Council in the framework of the Universal Periodic Review, Amnesty International deplores the fact that the Iranian authorities are further entrenching discrimination against women and girls in law and practice. Not only are the authorities failing to amend existing discriminatory legislation, but they have implemented regulations and are considering introducing legislation which would worsen women's unequal treatment under the law.

For example, since September 2009, female students have been required to study at universities in their home towns or cities, thereby restricting their free access to higher education. No such requirement exists for male students.

In addition, the *Majles*, Iran's parliament, has continued its discussion of a controversial piece of legislation, known as the Family Protection Bill, which has been dubbed the Anti-Family Bill by women's right campaigners.

Following intensive lobbying by activists, in 2008, the *Majles* Law and Legal Affairs Committee dropped two clauses of particular concern to women: a clause which would allow men to take a second wife without the permission of his first wife and another which would impose a tax on the *mehriyeh* – a sum contracted to a woman on her marriage, which is only usually payable in the event of her divorce. However, in January 2010, the spokesperson of the Law and Legal Affairs Committee announced that the Committee had reinstated these clauses with some modifications, which women's rights activists believe will, if passed into law, constitute a retrograde step for women's rights in Iran.

Amnesty International is adding its voice to the more than 2200 women's rights activists and equal rights defenders who have to date signed a statement objecting to the proposed legislation.¹ The organization is calling for the Bill not to be adopted in its present form. Instead, the Iranian authorities must uphold their commitments made in Geneva in February 2010 to adopt measures to guarantee women's equality under the law and to ensure the equal treatment of women and girls in law and practice by immediately reviewing this Bill to ensure that its adoption and implementation will not lead to any form of gender discrimination.

Against this backdrop of entrenched discrimination against women and girls in Iran, women have also suffered state repression during the post-presidential election violence. According to IranGenderEquality.com, at least 138 women, – among them students, civil society

¹ See for example <http://familylaw.irangenderequality.com/spip.php?article150>

campaigners, political activists and journalists – have been arrested since June 2009. While some have been released on bail, others have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms or are still held months after their arrest without charge or trial. Some – such as members of the “Mourning Mothers” – a group of women whose children were killed during the post election repression and their supporters, have been arrested for peacefully protesting about human rights violations and demanding accountability. Others appear to be held solely on account of their family relations.

Recent arrests of women documented by Amnesty International include:

- **Mahboubeh Karami** – a member of the One Million Signatures Campaign (also known as the Campaign for Equality) who was arrested on 2 March 2010 at her home on the basis of a general arrest warrant dated May 2009. This is the fifth time she has been arrested in connection with her activism.
- **Shiva Nazar Ahari**, a member of the Committee of Human Rights Reporters was arrested for the second time since the June 2009 election on 20 December 2009, and remains held in Evin Prison without charge or trial. At least six other members of the Committee are also currently detained.
- **Behareh Hedayat**, a member of the Central Committee of the the Office for the Consolidation of Unity (a national student body which has been active in calling for political reform and opposing human rights violations) was arrested on 31 December 2009, and is also held in Evin Prison without charge or trial. Shortly before her arrest, in early December 2009, her recorded video speech for a conference in the Netherlands entitled “International solidarity with Iranian students' movement On the occasion of Iran's National Student's Day”² was widely circulated on the internet.
- **Zahra Jabbari**, was arrested on 18 September 2009, when mass anti-government protests were held. She is detained in Evin Prison, apparently on account of her having relatives based with the Peoples Mohahedin Organization, a banned opposition group. Her trial has not yet been concluded.
- Seven supporters of the Mourning Mothers – **Leila Seyfi Elahi, Zhila Karamzadeh Makvandi, Fatemeh Rastegari, Mrs Ebrahim, Elham Ahsani, Farzaneh Zaynali and Manijeh Taheri** – who were arrested on 7 and 8 February 2010 are reportedly detained in Section 209 of Evin Prison without charge or trial.
- **Mahsa Jazini** – a journalist based in Esfahan and member of the Campaign for Equality was arrested on 7 February 2010 and released from Dastgerd prison in Esfahan on 1 March. According to reports, she was told at the time of her arrest that the reason for her detention was that she was a feminist.
- **Maryam Zia**, a children's rights activist who is the director of the Association for the Endeavour for a World Deserving of Children was arrested on 31 December at her home and is believed to be held in Evin Prison.

Amnesty International believes that all these women are prisoners of conscience, held solely for their peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression, assembly and association, or on account of their family links and calls for their immediate and unconditional release

² A video of her address may be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l26k19Ps5oo&feature=related>

