

STATEMENT BY 700 ADVOCATES OF EQUAL RIGHTS ON THE OCCASION OF JUNE 12TH, THE DAY OF SOLIDARITY OF IRANIAN WOMEN

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Change for Equality: Last year's commemoration of the 22nd of Khordad (June 12th, 2006), in the form of a peaceful protest in Haft-e Tir Square, which was organized to mark the day of solidarity of Iranian women, was witness to an important and historical development in the 100 year history of the Iranian women's movement. The social environment of that time had, for a number of reasons, suffered from relative inactivity and disorientation and rendered women's rights and civil society activists, as well as a large sector of the women's movement, stagnate. With the support and collaboration of the student and worker's movements, the commemoration of the 22nd of Khordad (June 2006) in Haft-e Tir Square, in honor of the successful event held the previous year in front of Tehran University, not only managed to shatter this stagnation and inactivity but it was successful in reminding us of the need for the women's movement to continue its efforts beyond political differences and factionalism. Further and most important, this peaceful protest was successful in allowing the demands of women's rights activists for equal rights to reach the general public.

On the other hand, despite the expectations of some, this event, not only did not result in loss of support and involvement of activists in the women's movement, but served as a catalyst in promoting unity among different groups within the women's movement. More importantly, the protest of 22nd of Khordad in Haft-e Tir Square, created an opportunity for new forces to join the women's movement, and served as a vehicle for the creation and start of the "One Million Signatures Campaign," which seeks to collect signatures with a view toward ending legal discrimination against women. With the start of activities within this grassroots Campaign, and utilizing proactive and innovative approaches, the demands of the women's movement found expression in a broader framework, penetrating into different social groups. In fact, we could aptly claim that the peaceful demonstration on the 22nd of Khordad (June 12, 2006) resulted in the expansion of the women's movement.

Pressures Intensify; Costs Increase These positive achievements however have had negative consequences for many women's rights activists. After the peaceful protest in Haft-e Tir Square in June of 2006, and the birth of the "One Million Signatures Campaign," those opposed to women's equal rights did not remain inactive. In the past year alone, we have witnessed and endured increased arrests of women's rights defenders, unfair accusations and charges, serial summons and interrogations, imposition of high bond and bail amounts in exchange for the freedom of our colleagues, and heavy prison sentences for women's rights defenders. In fact, the past year was witness to the arrest and imprisonment of 121 women's rights activists. Nearly one billion tomans (roughly 110 million dollars) in bail and personal guarantees intended to free women's rights activists from prison have been posted. In total, 14 years of suspended probationary prison sentences and nearly 9 years of prison sentences which must be served by women's rights defenders have been issued.

Of course, we had anticipated that as the discourse on women's rights and demands of the women's movement expanded and penetrated society, the pressures, limitations and negative consequences of such demands would increase on equal rights defenders proportionately—pressures imposed by some power holders who see the just demands of women's rights advocates as contradictory to their own interests. These pressures have been imposed on women's rights activists with a view toward isolating them and forcing into the private sphere. But these tactics have not been limited to women's rights activists alone rather they have targeted women from all walks of life, and have been dispensed in a planned and organized manner. It seems that these pressures are not solely limited to women's protest gatherings but are doled out to women, in retaliation to their increased agency, their increased self confidence and their increased demands, designed to improve their own lives.

The massive arrest of women, under the guise of a program commonly referred to as "the program to combat

poor hejab" has moved the issue of women's imprisonment beyond the small circle of women's rights defenders into a broad segment of society and now threatens ordinary women, who because of simple differences in their style of dress, has made them fair game for a massive assault by police forces. According to published reports 14,635 women in various areas around the country have been arrested under the "program to combat poor hejab" and 67,000 women have received warnings about their style of dress. It seems that the aims of such violent crackdowns are to incrementally instill fear in the hearts of women, with a view toward driving away from the public arena. In other words, these types of programs aim to push women back into their homes, and do indeed promise to hold for our society tragic consequences.

Obstruction of Social Movements The Student movement too, which has benefited from the increased activity and impact of female students and as a result has become more lively and feminine creating stronger bonds and connections with the women's movement, has faced from the start of this academic year multiple problems. In the past year, the university system has witnessed the increased relegation of female students to their homes, through the implementation of a quota program, which seeks to decrease the number of female students entering into university. This program, which justifies its actions by claiming that female students (currently at over 60%) are taking up spaces which rightfully belong to male students, is in essence a program designed to drive women out of the higher education system.

At the same time, student activists have faced a broad security crackdown, including: creation of cases against some politically active masters' students by marking them as "Starred Students" and thus preventing many of them from registering for courses; prevention of free elections within student organizations through the employment of a variety of tactics designed to threaten and limit student activist; and the obstruction of educational, social and cultural activities implemented by student organizations, including the implementation of programs in commemoration of March 8th, International Women's Day.

In the last month especially we have witnessed an intensified crackdown, including at times physical violence, against student activists. More than 100 students have been called into University disciplinary committees, or have faced suspension from university, or like Mahdieh Golrou, Mandana Chatrechi, Fahimeh Shojaie, Hamideh Hosseini, Maryam Seyed Karimi and Asal Akhavan, have been prevented from entering university grounds, or like Sedighe Bigleri have been prevented access to recreational facilities. On the other hand, the rape of a female student in Kermanshah, by university officials, instills fear among female university students, forcing to dread the possibility that they too may in fact face such retaliations. Additionally, the arrest and imprisonment of several editors of student publications, has brought under assault the sense of security of students more than ever before, and created a new crisis within academic circles. Under the delusional pretense of possible conspiracies devised foreign powers which seek to take advantage of university personnel, professors too are coming under attack by security forces.

It is not just the women's and student movements which have faced violent crackdowns. In fact, in response to their professional demands, teachers too have come under attack during the past year. Female teachers, like Soraya Darabi and Tayebe Mirzaie have been imprisoned for simply demanding higher wages and other hardworking and learned educators are facing summons to court and interrogations, and have had to put up hefty bail amounts to ensure their release from prison.

Members of the labor unions and their families too are suffering from violence and security crackdowns. For these workers who have only expressed professional demands and have demanded increased wages, heavy prison sentences too have been issued, including a 5 year prison sentence for Mansour Osanlou. Many others have been dismissed from their place of employment. It is clear that the heavy burden of these crackdowns and dismissals are felt most severely by the women in these families.

It seems that some power holders, instead of ensuring women equal rights under law, have chosen to dispense their violent crackdowns against all social actors equally. For example, of the four people with dual nationality arrested on various charges, two of them are women. Nazi Azima has been prevented from the leaving the country for several months and Haleh Esfandiari is spending time in prison without access to her lawyer.

Afghan Refugees too have Failed to Avoid the Fallout With the implementation of forced repatriation programs, Afghan refugees have also come under attack. Forced repatriation programs are in fact being implemented in

such an unexpected, violent and inhumane manner, leading one to believe that the government indeed views these powerless refugees as our national enemies. Unfortunately in the midst of those forced to repatriate to Afghanistan, because of discriminatory laws which do not allow women to pass on their nationality to their children and spouses, the situation of Iranian women married to Afghan men is especially catastrophic and their children remain in a state of limbo, unable to take advantage of their primary and human right of access to education. The sudden arrest and dismissal of Afghan men from their place of employment, coupled with all the other violent policies of repatriation, has added to the crisis faced by their wives and children.

Expansion of Social Violence Rouge murderers who based on their own personal judgment deem their victims worthy of death (mahdor-ol-dam) are found innocent by the courts. Case in point being the defenders in Kerman, who on personal judgments claimed the lives of their victims by proclaiming them to be Mahdor-ol-dam, and instead of receiving punishment were found innocent and set free by the court system.

The public punishment and humiliation of delinquents, the new tactic employed by police to address the many social problems caused by these violent petty criminals, is a testament to the fact that instead of adopting positive educational and rehabilitative approaches to addressing violence and corruption, police officials desire to institutionalize the concept of force and violence into the fabric of our culture and society and in the minds and hearts of our youth. Institutionalizing violence in this manner, inevitably impacts most negatively women, because when violence is dispersed so publicly by the police force in our society, the hidden violence that is directed toward women and children, who are often the most vulnerable groups within our society, will indeed expand, taking on a unprecedented intensity.

This public violence has also been dispersed onto other social groups, including ethnic and religious minorities. Examples include the systematic arrest of journalists in Azarbaijan and Kurdistan and crackdowns against the Gonabad Daravish, a minority religious group. Pressures and increased limitations have been placed upon musicians and artists as well.

In the final analysis, this disquieting patchwork of violence in our society will impact most negatively women and children. Clearly increased social and official violence will lead to increased violence in the private sphere and given the fact that women lack power and legal rights and remedies, especially women from lower socio-economic sectors of society, it is inevitable that they will feel the brunt of this violence and will be forced to carry an unfair burden in this respect.

The depth of the impact of this violence should also be assessed in a broader framework. Given the international tensions, our country is under more scrutiny than ever before. As such, violent policies will not only be met by national protest, but in fact will face international protest as well, in turn increasing tensions and pressures on Iranian society at the global level.

Prospects for Hope and Illumination Of course, this dark situation is only a description of one dimension of our reality. The sustained presence of the women's movement (along with other social activists), their resistance and persistent dedication to remain active in the public sphere makes up the brighter side of our reality. All of this is a testament to the maturity of women and increasing solidarity among women's rights activists. Increased awareness, expansion of women's demands and expectations, and the commitment to utilize innovative and new strategies, especially those adopted by activists involved in the One Million Signatures Campaign, has had an impact on decision makers. Most recently there two pieces of legislation have been taken up by the Parliament. These include introduction of legislation on equal dieh for men and women and legislation which seeks to increase the legal age of responsibility of minors. These are glorious and commendable victories that can be claimed by the women's movement. All of these achievements are testament to the fact that our demands within the Campaign are indeed achievable. It seems that now, in contrast to past years, organized actions by women in the form of Campaigns, such as the One Million Signatures Campaign, the Campaign to Eliminate Stoning, Women's Peace Organizations, to name only a few, have increased to such a degree, that in this difficult social and political environment maintaining and defending these gains by women's rights activists have become our priority.

As such and given the complicated situation of our country, women's rights activists, on the occasion of 22nd of Khordad and the anniversary of the day of solidarity among Iranian women, warn decision makers that the

violence expended in the form of official or unofficial policy by some within the security system, has the potential to cause extreme social tensions and or expand existing ones. On the other hand, with a view toward protecting the women's movement, the consistent resistance of women's rights activists and the progression of their activities which have managed to penetrate society at the grassroots level in unprecedented form, especially because of employment of innovative methodologies of face-to-face interaction utilized within the Campaign, this year, on the anniversary of the day of solidarity among Iranian women, 22nd of Khordaad 1386 (June 12, 2007) instead of organizing another public protest, we will focus on expansion of our activities, so that our demands can multiply throughout the country and we can increase awareness about legal discrimination against women, with a view to changing the status quo.

So, through a conscience decision to change our strategy with a view toward reinforcing the accomplishments of the last year, we choose to demonstrate that we have indeed employed patience in our path toward achieving our human rights demands. Without doubt we will continue our activities, albeit we may have to do so through the adoption of different strategies as needed, until we are able to achieve our goals. In the midst of all this, we warn decision makers and power holders that if instead of taking heed of our demands and devising a logical response intended to change discriminatory laws against women, especially family law, they choose to continue to devise violent strategies and policies targeting women, without a doubt women's lives be impacted negatively. In fact the continuation of these violent policies targeting women will impact all of Iranian society, which will come to face severe obstacles and challenges in the form of an unparalleled social crisis with no remedy.

[This statement was signed by 700 women's rights activists. Read it in Farsi.](#)

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Summary:

The present statement was issued by Iranian women's rights advocates and their supporters on the occasion of June 12th Solidarity day with Iranian women. On June 12, 2005, several thousand women's rights activists, supported by students, organized a sit-in, at the entrance of Tehran University, to protest against the constitutional laws discriminating against women. A year later the same day, they gathered again to reiterate their demands. This time they were violently attacked and beaten by security forces and some of them were arrested. Being deprived of their right to free speech and free assembly, they continued their struggle in an innovative way: they launched the one million signatures campaign (August 19th, 2006), taking their demands to Iran's civil society and mustering popular support by collecting citizens' signatures against gender discrimination in the country. Since the beginning of the one million signatures campaign women rights campaigners have been harassed, arbitrarily arrested, and physically and psychologically tormented. The government denied their right to assemble in public places on June 12, 2007, so instead they issued the present statement which blames the government for its use of unbridled violence against civil society.