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## Iranian regime erases progress on women's rights

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Despite International Women's Day celebrations today, women in Iran still struggle for basic rights. The country's conservative authorities forbid women from simple activities such as watching the World Cup qualifying soccer game live in a stadium.

More prominent are restrictions on their legal and civil rights.

Women in Iran can inherit only half as much of their parents' wealth as their brothers.

Their husbands can marry more than one woman, and automatically get custody of children after a divorce. Women can be jailed or hanged for defying the dress code, and they can be stoned to death for adultery.

Since the 1979 overthrow of the Shah, the fundamentalist governments dominated by clerics have stressed the traditional role of women and restricted their civil rights and participation in political activities.

"The changes of women's conditions are very minor, only about surface things. But the limitations on basic rights and the legislation infrastructure haven't been changed at all," said Mahnaz Afkhami, president of Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace, a nongovernmental organization based in Washington.

Iranian women are better-educated and more politically sophisticated than many of their Muslim neighbors. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reports that the literacy rate of Iranian women is 70 percent, compared with an average 46.2 percent in the Middle East.

A large number of Iranian women hold professional jobs in journalism, medicine or law, or become human-rights activists. Up to 70 percent of university students in Iran are female, said Swanee Hunt, director of the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

### Squelched opportunities

Women's active engagement in society, however, has been met with increasing oppression from the regime.

In June, Iran's Guardian Council, a conservative constitutional watchdog, barred all 81 female presidential candidates on the basis of their sex. Women are beaten or jailed for wearing clothes or makeup regarded as insufficiently modest, the State Department said in a 2004 human-rights report.

Islamic countries have various interpretations of religious law, resulting in different levels of sex disparities, but the authority of Islamic law cannot be changed easily. Eleven

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countries have Islam as a source of legislation, and 21 others have religious clauses in their laws, said Mohamed Mattar, a law professor at Johns Hopkins University.

Much has changed within the Islamic framework, Mr. Mattar said. "There might be some gender inequalities by international-rights standard, but it's up to interpretation. You can interpret it in a way to protect women's rights."

The marriageable age for Iranian women can be a barometer of progress toward equal rights.

The pro-Western Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, instituted the Family Protection Law in 1967 that raised the marriageable age of women to 18.

Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini overthrew the Shah in 1979, ending more than 2,500 years of Persian monarchy. He canceled the law, announced that women no longer could be judges, and segregated beaches and sports by sex. The marriageable age was reduced to 9.

In 1997, massive support from women made Mohammed Khatami, a moderate clergyman and reformist, president, said Azar Nafisi, a writer and literary scholar at Johns Hopkins University.

Reforms that were carried out included raising the marriageable age of girls to 13 and referring divorces to the court system. But Mr. Khatami was unable to challenge the religious power, and his reforms fell short of the expectations of many Iranians and encountered a setback with the presidential election victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad last year.

### **Politically active**

Mr. Ahmadinejad proposed to separate the sexes in universities and public places, the local press reported. In January, the government shut down a newspaper that ran a picture of women dressed in insufficiently Islamic garments and closed a women's publication.

"The change of regimes, from Khomeini to Khatami or Ahmadinejad, brought differences only on social and cultural ramifications. The infrastructural legislation hasn't changed at all," Mrs. Afkhami said.

Sex segregation, however, is partly responsible for the high education rate of women in Iran. Mrs. Afkhami said the need to have professional women in all segregated fields increased female university enrollments.

Iranian women gained constitutional recognition of equal rights in 1906, and the right to vote in 1962. Since then, the massive movements made them "active, articulate and very capable" of political involvement, Mrs. Afkhami said. "Their consciousness and eagerness for equal rights can hardly be pushed back."

The reversal of basic rights in 1979 increased the political activity of Iranian women.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi lost her job as Iran's first female judge after the revolution, because conservative clerics insisted that Islam forbids the judgments of women. She turned to the practice of law, defending liberal and dissident causes in the courts.

The political scene, however, remains dominated by men. Only 0.1 percent of ministry-level jobs and 4.1 percent of parliament seats are held by women, the U.N. Development Program reported.

"Women are most negatively affected by the fundamentalist regime, and they are most eager for social and cultural changes," Mrs. Afkhami said. "They are the most important population to bring changes to Iran and to increase democracy in the country."

### **Demand for U.S. efforts**

Although the U.S. State Department has sponsored programs on women's civil and political rights in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan, similar efforts are absent in Iran.

Sanctions prevented U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations from engaging with Iran's civil groups. Agencies such as the International Republican Institute and the National

Democracy Institute, which specialize in promoting democracy in foreign countries, do not operate in Iran.

Meanwhile, the Iranian government's hostility toward nongovernmental organizations, though briefly interrupted by Mr. Khatami's efforts to liberalize society, has largely barred international activities in Iran.

"The U.S. should give voice to what's happening in Iran and cultivate more people-to-people exchange," Mrs. Nafisi said. "When people take part, the change is much more powerful than working from outside."

Mrs. Nafisi said the international community should promote in Iran the same nonviolent democratic changes that succeeded in South Africa and Eastern Europe.

During the nuclear stalemate, the United States is focusing on civilians in Iran. At a congressional hearing in February, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pledged \$75 million to empower Iranian civil movements. Without spelling out who would receive the money, Miss Rice said it would be allocated to opposition parties, free press, the Internet and international exchange.

"A portion of this funding should be directed toward efforts to break down barriers to women's participation," Ms. Hunt said.

"If the United States is serious about promoting democracy in the Middle East, it must put women's rights at the center of any dialogue," she added.

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