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To the Working Group on Communications on the Status of Women:

Please find attached a submission on women human rights defenders in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Human Rights First is a human rights advocacy organization based in New York City and Washington, D.C. Since 1978, our mission has been to create a secure and humane world – advancing justice, human dignity, and respect for the rule of law. Since its inception, Human Rights First has worked in partnership with activists around the world, and the Human Rights Defenders Program advocates for their rights under the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.¹

Background on Women Human Rights Defenders

Without individuals striving to promote and defend them, human rights are an abstract concept. For this reason, it is essential for human rights defenders to be recognized and protected. The term “human rights defender,” though not precisely defined under the U.N. Declaration, is understood to refer to all of using non-violent means to promote and protect the rights of others. They may be lawyers, journalists, trade unionists, and grass-roots activists, as well as social workers, nurses, teachers, government employees, or community leaders.

Women human rights defenders are critical actors in the realization of human rights for all people. They are also instrumental in the fight against gender discrimination and in achieving women’s full realization of their human rights, as they confront inequality and repression on the local and national levels from within their own societies. Even those who do not focus their work specifically on women’s rights challenge traditional gender roles through their prominent engagement in public and political life.

Women defenders face many of the same problems men face, including restrictions on freedom of assembly, association, and expression. However, a history of discrimination, coupled with a struggle for gender equality set women

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¹ U.N. Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, U.N. Doc A/RES/53/144, March 8, 1999.

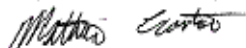
defenders apart from other defenders. Women defenders are doubly burdened: not only by repressive governments, but also by deeply held patriarchal attitudes pervasive throughout society that discourage women from taking a public role. As a result, they face a range of additional, gender-specific pressures from both state and non-state actors, including their families and communities, to discontinue their activism. In many cases, the state fails to recognize the risks women defenders face, let alone provide them with adequate protection. Gender-based discrimination in society and before the law, and the marginalization of women's issues and women's rights activists (even within the human rights community) can lead to fewer protections for women defenders who endure threats and abuse.

Although nongovernmental organizations have begun to monitor and document the problems faced by women defenders, reporting remains inadequate. The reasons for this include: narrow definitions among researchers of who is a human rights defender; a lack of understanding and appreciation for the types of gender-specific persecution faced by women defenders; and practical concerns among women defenders involving the futility of reporting and the risks attendant thereto.

By addressing the gender-specific forms of persecution women defenders face, international bodies such as the Commission on the Status of Women (the "Commission") will make significant strides in the realization of women's human rights.

The following is a submission on the treatment of women defenders in Iran. Though this submission focuses primarily on defenders active with the One Million Signatures Campaign, the examples provided illustrate the challenges that women human rights defenders face more broadly in Iran, and around the world. We hope the Commission will incorporate these concerns in its work more generally.

Sincerely,



Matt Easton
Director, Human Rights Defenders Program

The Islamic Republic of Iran

Recommendations

Human Rights First respectfully requests that the Commission make the following recommendations to the government of Iran:

- Drop all charges and overturn all convictions against Iranian women defenders who are peacefully calling for legal reform;
- Ensure that state-run media stop using inflammatory language against defaming women defenders as a means of discrediting them;
- Stop blocking websites dedicated to women's rights;
- Repeal the family laws and provisions of the penal code that directly discriminate against women as a first step toward receiving equal protection of the state.

The Situation of Women Defenders in Iran

All human rights defenders in Iran face restrictions on their work and are at risk of arrest, detention, and limitations on freedom of movement and expression. The Ministry of the Interior restricts the activities of non-governmental organizations that allegedly receive finance from “problematic internal and external sources aimed at overthrowing the system.” [The Ministry] frequently charges defenders with “collusion to threaten national security” and spreading “propaganda against the state.” In this regard, women defenders face many of the same obstacles and risks faced by their male counterparts.

However, women defenders also work from a position of marginalization and severe discrimination before the law. Gender inequality in Iran is upheld and perpetuated by two interrelated factors: (1) state-sponsored institutional structures and laws based on gender-biased, hard-line interpretations of religious principles, and (2) Patriarchal values and attitudes based that permeate society at all levels.

These two factors are mutually reinforcing. The state sanctions discrimination against women through laws that codify, legitimize and perpetuate gender inequality, such as rules of evidence that value a woman's testimony as worth only half a man's. State-sanctioned discrimination adds force to private acts of discrimination against women, in some cases allowing severe violations of women's rights to take place with impunity (for instance, honor killings). As a result, women activists, aware they do not benefit from the same protection as men, especially when the threats or abuse are initiated within their families or immediate environments, are further marginalized. The failure of the Iranian government to hold perpetrators accountable increases women defenders' vulnerability to violence from both state and non-state actors.²

Women's rights advocacy in Iran

² See Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences, “Mission to the Islamic Republic of Iran,” U.N. Doc E/CN.4/2006/61/Add.3, January 2006.

Despite the restrictive and hostile environment in which they must operate, Iranian women have long organized to defend their rights and the rights of others. In fact, because of the limited opportunities for women to become involved in political life, women have become strong voices within civil society. As a result, over the past few years, the women's rights movement in Iran has become one of the most vibrant, grass-roots social movements in the country.³

Iranian advocates for women's equality are pressing for reform of laws that discriminate against women in the areas of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, among others. They write about and expose brutal practices such as honor killings and stoning and press for the greater participation of women in public and political life.

Harassment and prosecution of members of the One Million Signatures Campaign

Women's rights advocates directly challenge societal and official discrimination against women, a controversial and potentially dangerous activity. The One Million Signatures Campaign (the "Campaign") is a grass-roots movement launched by women's rights activists after security forces violently broke up a protest held on June 12, 2006 in Tehran, arresting 70 men and women.⁴

The aim of the Campaign is to collect one million signatures on a petition addressed to the Iranian parliament asking for a reform and revision of current laws that discriminate against women. Just some of the laws that the Campaign seeks to address deal with women's rights to divorce, to inheritance, and to pass on their nationality to their children. By collecting signatures, the Campaign hopes to raise awareness about gender inequality in Iranian laws. The Campaign has held seminars on these topics, but most activities are carried out through face-to-face discussions with the general public by trained Campaign members.

Campaign members have faced systemic harassment and obstruction by security forces, including: arrest and prosecution for collecting signatures; detention and interrogation for convening meetings; restrictions on freedom of expression; restrictions on freedom of movement; and defamatory comments in state-controlled media.⁵ These restrictions violate rights granted to human rights defenders under both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

Arrests and prosecutions for collecting signatures

³ In its 2007 submission, Human Rights First reported on the arrests of women's rights activists following the June 12, 2006 protest, and also on March 4, 2007. Many of these women have been active members of the One Million Signatures Campaign, and continue to face prosecution and harassment.

⁴ To learn more about the Campaign, see "About One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws," available at: <http://www.4equality.info/english/spip.php?article18>.

⁵ Human Rights First maintains a timeline of such incidents, available at: http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd_iran/hrd_iran_timeline.htm.

A number of Campaign members have been arrested simply for collecting signatures, though there is nothing illegal about this activity under Iranian laws. Some examples are:

- Zeinab Peyghambarzadeh: arrested on December 15, 2006, while collecting signatures on the Metro (the subway in Tehran), and detained for five days before being released on a third party guarantee.
- Nasim Sarabandi and Fatemeh Dehdashti: arrested on January 10, 2007, also while collecting signatures on the Metro. After spending a day in detention, they were summoned to the Revolutionary Court in April 2007 and sentenced in August 2007 to six-month suspended sentences for a period of two years.
- Saeedeh Amin, Mahboubeh Hosseinzadeh, Sara Imanian, Nahid Keshavarz, and Homayoun Nami: arrested on April 2, 2007, while collecting signatures in Laleh Park. Amin, Imanian and Nami were detained for a day only, while Hosseinzadeh and Keshavarz were transferred to Evin prison and spent 13 days in prison before being released on bail.
- Ehteram Shadfar and her neighbor (who wishes to remain anonymous): Shadfar's neighbor was arrested on June 10, 2007, while collecting signatures. When asked to name the person who provided her with the petition, she led the arresting officers to Shadfar's house. Both women were detained for 24 hours. On February 19, 2008, Shadfar received a six-month suspended sentence, valid for a period of two years (meaning that for a two-year period, Shadfar is at risk of having to serve a six-month sentence should she take part in any Campaign activity)
- Amir Yaghoub-Ali: arrested on July 11, 2007 while collecting signatures in Andisheh Park. He spent 28 days in solitary confinement at Evin Prison before being released on bail. On May 25, 2008, the Revolutionary Court sentenced Yaghoub-Ali to one year imprisonment for "endangering national security," a sentence he has appealed.
- Raheleh Asgarizadeh and Nasim Khorsravi: arrested on February 14, 2008 while collecting signatures at Daneshjoo Park, and spent 12 days in detention before being released on bail.

Detention and interrogation for convening meetings:

Campaign members are consistently hindered in their efforts to gather and meet in connection with the Campaign. One of the Campaign's goals is to educate the public about the aims of the Campaign by raising awareness about the laws they seek to change. Therefore, the ability to convene meetings is integral to these efforts. However, the authorities have blocked or disrupted meetings, and have arrested Campaign members meeting in private homes:

- Ten armed policemen violently disrupted an educational workshop in Khorramabad on September 14, 2007, arresting 20 local participants and five Campaign members from Tehran. All but three of three of them were released after 12 hours of detention and

questioning. Three of the local participants, Reza Dowlatshah, Bahman Azadi, and Khosrow Nasimpour, were detained for three days.

- Security forces forcibly entered the home of Khadijeh Moghaddam, a Campaign member, on April 8, 2008, placing her in detention for nine days.
- Security forces prevented women's rights activists from meeting on June 12, 2008, to commemorate the anniversary of their protest. The event the women were planning was cancelled due to threats against the venue's owner. On the day of the meeting, armed guards prevented anyone from entering and arrested nine women who had shown up: Nafiseh Azad, Jila Baniyaghoob, Farideh Ghaeb, Jelveh Javaheri, Sarah Loghmani, Alieh Motalebzadeh, Nahid Mirhaj, Aida Saadat, and Nasrin Sotoudeh. All women were released after spending eight hours in detention. However, a few of the women were summoned to appear in Court on August 28, 2008.

Prosecution for writing, and other restrictions on Internet access and free expression:

Since the authorities prevent them from meeting, the Internet serves as an essential tool for communication and the sharing of information. Women's rights activists in Iran have encountered difficulties writing about their goals and issues:

- Blocking websites: the website of the Campaign, "Change for Equality," has been blocked at least seven times, forcing the organizers to continually secure new domains and inform their readers of these changes.⁶ Several other websites set up by women's rights activists and dedicated to women's rights issues have been blocked and rendered inaccessible to people inside Iran.⁷
- Shutting down a women's publication: on January 29, 2008, the Press Supervisory Council, an agency of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, notified the staff at Zanan (a women's magazine established in 1992) that their license was to be cancelled immediately. Authorities said that the magazine was a "threat to the psychological security of the society" because it showed Iranian women in a "black light."⁸
- Prosecution for writing articles: at least two activists have faced charges for contributing to the website of the Campaign and other websites on women's issues. Maryam Hosseinkhah was arrested on November, 18, 2007 in relation to articles she wrote on the Campaign's website, as well as the site Zaneestan. Hosseinkhah was detained in Evin prison for 45 days before being released on bail. Jelveh Javaheri was arrested on December 1, 2007 for her writings and spent 30 days in prison before her release on bail. Both Hosseinkhah and Javaheri continue to face charges for "disturbing public opinion," "propaganda against the state," and "publishing lies," and

⁶ See: <http://www.change4equality.com/english/spip.php?article144>.

⁷ http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd_iran/alert013107_iranian_women.htm.

⁸ Human Rights First's alert on the closure of Zanan is available here: http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd_iran/alert021208_zanan.htm.

most recently appeared before the Revolutionary Court on August 2, 2008, in connection with these charges.

Restrictions on freedom of movement and travel bans:

Another tactic used against activists is to prevent them from traveling abroad, effectively limiting their ability to strengthen contacts with the international community:

- Parvin Ardalan: prevented from traveling to Stockholm to receive the Olof Palme Award for her activism on behalf of women's rights. On March 3, 2008, Ardalan was pulled off the plane and told that she was under a travel ban.⁹
- Mansoureh Shojaee: prevented from traveling to Dubai on March 9, 2008, where she was planning to attend a conference.
- Sussan Tahmasebi: stopped at the airport on 23 October, 2007 and told that she had to forfeit her laptop computer before boarding the plane. The security officials kept Tahmasebi's passport, and would not return it to her unless she gave them her passport. She refused and decided to forego her travel plans.¹⁰

Harsh sentences for women's rights activists from the province of Kurdistan

Kurds in Iran have long suffered discrimination and violation of their political, economic, social and cultural rights.¹¹ This is especially the case when Kurds engage in human rights activism. The Iranian government has been battling separatist groups in Kurdistan, some of which they believe to be receiving funding from outside Iran. The authorities cast a wide net, accusing a broad range of activists of supporting armed separatist groups. The trials of these activists take place with very little transparency:

- Ronak Safarzadeh: detained since October 9, 2007. The day before her arrest, she attended a meeting in Sanandaj to mark International day of the Child, and collected signatures in support of the Campaign. Following her arrest, Safarzadeh was held incommunicado for three months. In May 2008, her lawyer reported that she has been charged with "*moharebeh*," or "enmity against God." Such a charge could result in the imposition of the death penalty, although Safarzadeh has not yet been sentenced.
- Hana Abdi: detained since November 4, 2007. Abdi was a member of a Kurdish women's rights organization, *Azar Mehr*, and also involved with the Signatures Campaign. On June 18, 2008, she was sentenced to a five-year prison term to be

⁹ Human Rights First's alert on this matter is available here:

http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd_iran/alert031408_ardalan.htm.

¹⁰ <http://www.irwomen.org/spip.php?article4751>.

¹¹ For more details on this issue, see, Amnesty International, "Iran: Human Rights Abuses against the Kurdish Minority," 2008.

served in exile, on charges of “gathering and colluding to threaten national security” under Article 610 of the Islamic Penal Code.

- Zeynab Bayzeydi: arrested on July 9, 2008, after the police ordered her to present herself for interrogation at a police station in the city of Mahabad, in the western province of Kurdistan. Bayzeydi is a member of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan (HROK) and the One Million Signatures Campaign, and had authored a number of articles on women’s rights issues. She was brought before a Revolutionary Court in Mahabad on July 31, 2008 and charged with membership of unauthorized human rights associations, and on account of her activities in support of women’s rights. Around August 9, 2008, her family learned that she has been sentenced to a four-year prison term to be served in exile. Bayzeydi did not have a lawyer.

Defamatory comments in state-controlled media against women activists:

Government-controlled media have made derogatory comments about women activists, including slanderous remarks regarding prominent human rights defender and 2003 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Shirin Ebadi.

A recent media campaign against Ebadi, asserting that Ebadi’s daughter has converted to the Baha’i faith¹² and that Ebadi herself is a Baha’i sympathizer¹³ has led a number of international organizations, including Reporters without Borders¹⁴ and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders to issue alerts regarding fears for Ebadi’s safety.¹⁵ Since the Islamic Republic of Iran views the Baha’i faith as heretical, and also because many Muslims believe that conversion from Islam to another religion is apostasy, publicizing such rumors and fomenting controversy about Ebadi exposes her to the possibility of serious harm, and even death. Ebadi is long accustomed to threats because of her work. Ebadi and her group, the Center for the Defense of Human Rights, have spoken out on a number of issues in Iran lately, including the sudden rise in executions and a Family Protection Law being considered by the Iranian parliament that contains controversial provisions opposed by women’s groups. Ebadi also represents a number of women arrested in connection with the One Million Signatures Campaign.

It would appear that the regime is trying to provoke attacks on Ebadi or create a climate that would force her to either give up her work or leave Iran. And, when the regime, through government-controlled media sources, openly defames an internationally recognized figure such as Ebadi, it promotes a climate of hostility for other defenders.

¹² On August 6, 2008, the Islamic Republic News Agency reported that Shirin Ebadi’s daughter had embraced the Baha’i faith.

¹³ A front-page story in the August 3, 2008 issue of *Kayhan*, reporting that Ebadi received an appreciation letter from a Baha’i Center headquartered in Israel, thanking her for her work in defense of Baha’is in Iran.

¹⁴ See: http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=28103.

¹⁵ Human Rights First noted the disparaging comments made in *Kayhan News* about Ebadi, following her criticism over the rise in executions and other human rights concerns, in the following alert: http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd_iran/alert080608_amir.htm.

In addition, the Islamic Republic News Agency circulated statements made by Payam Fazlinejad (affiliated with Kayhan) to university students in Khuzistan, claiming that the One Million Signatures Campaign is anti-Islam and that it is trying to damage the morals of the country and overthrow the regime, among many other accusations.

Conclusion

Women human rights defenders in Iran face continued challenges in their efforts to peacefully promote gender equality. The Commission should communicate its concern for women activists to the government of Iran. The government should stop violating women activists' rights to freedom of assembly, association, and expression. Specifically, the government should cease the judicial persecution of women who have been unfairly prosecuted and convicted due to their work to promote human rights.