

# **The Post-Revolutionary Women's Uprising of March 1979: An Interview with Nasser Mohajer and Mahnaz Matin by Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi**

## **Introduction**

Earlier this year two veteran researchers of modern Iran, Nasser Mohajer and Mahnaz Matin, published their latest two volume work entitled, "The Uprising of Iranian Women, March 1979". The two volumes stand at approximately one thousand pages and together comprise a ground-breaking piece of research on a now iconic series of protests which captured the imagination of feminists around the world.

The suppression of those protests, which took place over the course of six days in March 1979, and which began in reaction to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's call for women to wear the veil in state ministries, has been widely interpreted with the historian's benefit of hindsight, as the end of the revolution's initial and short-lived period of exuberance and the rapid march towards the consolidation of a populist-hierocratic state. This state would make the control and regulation of women's bodies, behaviours and 'chastity' a top priority, and it remains one till this day.

The augmentation of the revolutionary Shi'ite clergy's hegemony was concurrent with the marginalisation of a plethora of competing political actors and social forces which had also been instrumental in the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy. Following the suppression of the independent women's movement less than two months after Khomeini's triumphant return, the country experienced the U.S. hostage crisis, the constitutional enshrinement of clerical rule, a raft of purges throughout the military establishment, universities, and civil service, mass prison executions, near civil war, countless political assassinations and an eight year conflict with Ba' thist Iraq. In light of the dark and destructive path traversed by the Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic in the 1980s and beyond, a number of historians and political activists have begun to seriously ponder the question, whether the failure of other secular and non-Islamist political forces to act in solidarity with the most important uprising of Iranian women in the country's history was an opportunity squandered?

Though there will almost certainly never emerge a satisfactory response to this question, the research of Mojaher and Matin will undeniably enrich and deepen our understanding of those six historic days in March 1979. The interview along with Mohajer and Matin's research will also prove of interest to a new generation of Iranian feminists and those sympathetic to their cause as the first comprehensive appraisal of the March 1979 women's protest movement. Not only because this progressive and secular movement has been occluded and obscured in the official narrative and historiography of the Islamic Republic, but also as a reminder that Iranian women's struggle for respect, equality and justice has been more than 100 years in the making, and as the interview concludes, "the new generation must not forget that it is standing on the shoulders of the generation of women which preceded it".

The following text is based on Nasrin Almasi and Farah Taheri's interview with Mohajer and Matin for the Persian language Canadian website and Journal Shahrvand (9 May 2013). The present English text while based largely on the Shahrvand interview has been edited with the approval of the interviewees. I have also provided some explanatory notes for readers less familiar with the chief actors, organisations and events of the first years of post-revolutionary turmoil.



## The Interview

**Why were the women's demonstrations of March 1979 in your view so important that you decided to spend several years researching them?**

**Mahnaz Matin:** The idea for this work took shape on the 30th anniversary of the uprising. From the time when I began working with Iranian women's groups in Paris, this protest movement was always spoken of; the activists with whom I was working at the time had vivid memories of it. But as someone who had not participated in the movement, I personally had no memory of them. In the meantime I had seen the film, *The Iranian Women's Movement, Year Zero*, which a group of French women had made about the demonstrations. It's a very interesting film which made a lasting impression on me prior to the uprising's 30th anniversary. When we began investigating, we immediately noticed that the information relating to the ins and outs of the movement was very scattered and a comprehensive record, let alone appraisal did not yet exist. We thus began research and writing on the premise that we would produce an article on the subject.

This was the first protest movement to emerge following the revolution from within the revolution itself and against the actions of the leadership. Such an event was unprecedented and it was for this reason that it attracted the attention of feminists around the world.

The women who initiated the first protest movement against Islamic fundamentalism inside Iran in March 1979, were not against the revolution. A large swathe of them participated in the revolution and perhaps for the same reason had the courage to pour into the streets and say "we are against the anti-women measures of the new regime". We started work in 2008, but the more materials and documents we found, the more we came to realise the greater significance of the movement. As I said, initially we wanted to write a single article on the basis of a number of documents and newspaper articles. Later we thought to interview a

number of the participants in the uprising which lasted six days. We transcribed the interviews and recorded the memories they had of those events. The more our work progressed, the more new dimensions we uncovered.

**Nasser Mohajer:** The research process is a complex one and has its own independent life. The research can take you far and distant places, which you may not have originally anticipated. It is only at the end of the research process that you realise the true importance of an historical event or phenomenon. It doesn't occur very often that the conclusions of a piece of research are the same as those with which the researcher began. Prior to beginning our research we had some understanding of the historical importance of this women's uprising, but the greater progress we made and the more hidden and elided aspects we uncovered, the more we came to appreciate the importance of the uprising with respect to the distinct paths facing the Iranian revolution at the time. For example, when you analyse the slogans of the movement, you see that they are mostly about "freedom" (azadi). In fact, the six days of demonstration decisively and resolutely highlighted the imperative of freedom. We may even say that no other movement in the first years of the revolution so decisively pursued the demand for freedom or gave it the centrality bestowed upon it by the women's movement. It seems women felt instinctively that the most important issue of our society was freedom and the most important challenge for all social forces was the struggle for connecting individual, political and social freedoms to legal equality for women and men.

The women who entered the public arena in March 1979 (Esfand 1357) were a cross-section of Iranian society's modern social forces. They wanted the revolution of February 1979 to continue to pursue democratic demands. With the fall of the monarchical regime, the revolution had achieved victory, but was still in a nebulous period of transition. The uprising of women in March 1979 was the first social movement to pursue the imperative of freedom, which was arguably the most important of those who opposed the Shah's dictatorship. It is the first movement which says "now, instead of despotism, freedom must be established!"

When analysing the slogans of the uprising we came to understand the authenticity with which they were imbued. When women rose to their feet and chanted, "We didn't make a revolution to go backwards!" they were making it clear that not only did they approve of the February revolution, but that they also believed their own movement to be a continuation of the revolution itself; they would say their aim was to realise yesterday's slogans in the present. When they chanted, "Freedom is not Eastern, not Western, it is universal", they were highlighting the universal character of freedom.

For the researcher there remains no doubt that after the February revolution of 1979, the women's movement expressed its existence and despite harassment and violence, refused to vacate from public space for six consecutive days. They became the vanguard of the democratic struggle, with freedom being the foundation of their movement. However this progressive, pro-democracy and secular force was not recognised or supported by other actors in the democratic movement, let alone by the Islamists. It is at this point where the historian inevitably asks him or herself whether the revolution would have taken the same path it had, if the independent women's movement had been supported by other secular forces e.g. the communists, socialists, social democrats and liberals? The women's uprising of March 1979 tells us that the fate of the revolution was not written in stone and a reactionary Shi'ite theocracy was not the necessary outcome of the struggle against the Shah's dictatorship.

**What was the social base of the women's uprising of March 1979?**

**Mahnaz Matin:** The impetus and chief participants in the movement were the urban middle classes, such as state and private sector employees, teachers, nurses, professionals, university and high school students and also housewives. The photographs of the uprising and the film *Year Zero* show many of those women who participated in the street demonstrations were not from the affluent sectors of Iranian society. Women affiliated to left-leaning political formations were also present in the movement, but their presence did not accord with the proclivities of the organisational hierarchy or leadership's recommendations, who did not believe in the women's movement. The leaders did not tell their women members to go and participate in the demonstrations. Each and every one of the women present in the movement participated on their own personal initiative.

While some leftist political groups organized programmes at the University of Tehran on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March, the women who were protesting Ayatollah Khomeini's statement on compulsory veiling for female state employees poured into the streets and began protesting of their own volition. When these women went to the university, they asked the women of these leftist organisations, "why are you sitting here? They [i.e. Islamic fundamentalists who support Khomeini] are striking and attacking us in the streets, and you have held a meeting here for International Women's Day!" This in turn caused many left-leaning women political activists to join in the demonstrations.

**Nasser Mohajer:** On 6 March 1979 [15 Esfand 1979] in a speech at the Feyzieh Seminary in Qom, Ayatollah Khomeini said, "Sin cannot be committed in Islamic ministries. Naked women must not enter Islamic ministries. Women must wear the hijab (veil) in the ministries". His statement clearly had women state employees in mind. But just as Mahnaz said, a much broader spectrum of Iranian women came out into the streets to protest those insulting comments. When you look to the European media, you see they emphasise that the clothes of most of the demonstrating women were western-style, that they wore jeans or had a jacket and skirt. But when you look at photos and film of the street demonstrations you realise women wearing the chador were also there; women donning the headscarf, though in not nearly as high numbers as those women without the veil.

In the face of this protest movement of several tens of thousands on 8th and 9th March, the Islamic Revolution National Television and Radio, which was headed at the time by Sadeq Qotbzadeh, adopted a policy of silence, and said absolutely nothing about the protests. On Saturday 10 March after several tens of thousands of women marched on the Palace of Justice and staged a sit-in of seven to eight thousand, state television and radio finally broke their silence and broadcast a film report. The report was an inept and insidious montage, which had two objectives: 1) To divide and provoke dissension within the women's protest movement and 2) Depict the movement as if it were in the hands of the monarchists. Ms. Mashid Amirshahi in her book *In Residence (Dar hazar)* has sketched the general lines of that news report and shown that state television tried to inculcate the idea "idolaters" (taghutiha) or even "prostitutes" (faheshahha) had a role in this protest movement, by portraying women in fur coats and garish glasses. We were informed how this film was turned into a montage by someone who worked for state television at the time and wrote about the incident in the book.

**Mahnaz Matin:** I should add that many people didn't participate in the demonstrations because they did not believe for a second that the hijab would become compulsory in Iran. Government authorities like [Mehdi] Bazargan disagreed with compulsory hijab and announced such. Even Qotbzadeh had said, "it's impossible for the hijab to become compulsory!" What I want to say is that few people thought the hijab will become compulsory

under Islamic rule. But the balance of power proved to be such that hijab became compulsory with relative ease.

**Nasser Mohajer:** On Thursday 8 March and Saturday 10 March 1979 women from all walks of life, amongst them many university students and school goers participated in the rallies. The number of demonstrators on Saturday exceeded Thursday's marches. Between fifty to one-hundred thousand people participated in demonstrations held on the Saturday. The epicentre of the movement was the University of Tehran and until four o'clock in the afternoon people continued to flow towards the Palace of Justice.

But on Saturday night when state television broadcast screened photographs and footage in the form of a montage and misrepresented the nature of the movement, apprehension and hesitation began to set in. Many of the students asked themselves: "Could it be true that we may have become the unsuspecting vehicle of monarchist machinations?" It was because of this moment of hesitancy that many distanced themselves from the protest movement. It is understandable. A people who only three weeks previously freed themselves from the yoke of the Shah's regime, did not wish to be perceived as the pawns of the monarchy. The women who participated in these demonstrations strived for a democratic, popular and progressive republic. They wished to prepare the way for freedom and the country's progress, not the return of the ancien régime. The Islamist forces which had just reached power were well aware of this ambivalence and ably capitalised on it to the detriment of this emancipatory movement.

**تصمیم نهائی دولت در باره کارمندان زائد**

**محدودیت اختیارات کمیته‌های موقت انقلاب**

**صدها ایرانی در فرودگاه لندن بازداشت شدند**

**اطلاعات**

**میزان بخشودگی خدمت وظیفه سربازان درجه‌داران و افسران**

**انعکاس وسیع نظر امام در مورد حجاب اسلامی**

**اسامی اعضای شورای انقلاب**

**جزیره علم باغی شد**

**میخواهند جزیره کیش را ۸۰۰ میلیون تومان بفروشند**

**ایران فقط ۳۳ روز ذخیره غذایی دارد**

**بانکها باید طبق موازین اسلامی باشند**

**بنی احمد آزاد شد**

One of the women’s slogans in the grass roots movement of March 1979 was “we did not make a revolution to go backwards”. What happened that despite all the assurances regarding women’s rights prior to the revolution, in the span of less than a month after the revolution, this emerged as the slogan of so many women?

Nasser Mohajer: The generation following the 1953 coup d’etat which overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegq, were unfamiliar with Iranian society and the socio-political

forces which were active prior to the coup. They did not have much knowledge regarding what had happened between 1941 and 1953, or the period's various political battles and controversies. They did not have much familiarity with the clergy. They didn't know who Navvab Safavi was or the nature of the Devotees of Islam. They had little idea regarding the acts of terror, murder and spraying of acid, carried out by Shi'i fundamentalists during those years. They were oblivious to the political and fundamentalist clergy's plans for the Islamicisation of the cultural and political life of Iranian society, or their desire to compel women to wear the chador and close down the drinking taverns. The level of suppression after the Shah's land reform programme, in particular after 1963, penetrated the whole breadth of Iranian society, and estranged a generation of Iranian youth from the last 100 years of their history.

Fathers and mothers of our generation who lived in the years 1941-1953 had some knowledge and understanding of the social forces which played a part in the Constitutional Movement of 1909-1911. They were not as ignorant as we were about the clerics and political Islam. Amongst the older generation there were many who on the eve of the February revolution warned: "Don't follow the clergy!" And in reply they would hear: "We are not following the clerics! Ayatollah Khomeini is not any cleric, he is a progressive cleric and a leading member of the modern clergy!"

Many people also thought that the clerics were incapable of governing a complex and vast nation and would soon be compelled to yield power to true revolutionary forces. Of course there were many leftists and democrats who were not really following the clergy and harboured a genuine desire for the country's democratisation and progress. The slogan, "We did not make a revolution to go backwards", reflected something which ran deeply beneath the surface of Iranian society. It was the slogan of modern social forces which began to emerge in the early 19th century.

Moreover, one should not forget that both modern and pre-capitalist classes participated in the February revolution. The slogan, "we did not make a revolution to go backwards" was the slogan of the revolution's modern forces, not the traditionalist ones, or those sympathetic to Khomeini's creed of political Islamism. The slogan belonged to classes which were facing forward, in lieu of looking to the past. The more I reflected on this slogan, the better I came to see that no slogan better conveys the spirit of the Iranian revolution and the spirit of the generation whose goal in overthrowing the Shah was the establishment of democracy and freedom.

In the course of the 20th century, Iranian society has undergone an important historical transition from a predominantly pre-capitalist and pre-modern socio-economic structure to an increasingly capitalist and modern one. As such two significant currents participated in the Iranian revolutionary movement: the first was attached to the old order of society and the traditional sectors and structures, and ably drew on the historical experience of 1941-1953, the Constitutional Revolution and the Tobacco movement (1892-1890) in its struggle against the Shah's regime. The second was a broad spectrum of modern social and political forces which to varying degrees suffered from a lack of historical consciousness and a general state of selective historical amnesia. Some of these forces were also afflicted by opportunism and misplaced optimism and ultimately lost to the conservative / reactionary current.

The six day uprising of modern, progressive Iranian women in March 1979 was a genuine opportunity for a convergence of modern social and political forces in Iranian society. It was also an opportunity to drive back the Islamist forces which had been in the ascendance since

Ashura (December) 1978. Alas, the squandering of that opportunity prepared the ground for the ever-increasing encroachment of the political Islamists led by Khomeini.

It is worth recalling the resolution read out on 10 March 1979 at the Palace of Justice by one of the women lawyers in attendance. It remains an important and enduring document of the six day uprising. It begins by reciting the first section of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms...without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.”

### **Do you know the person who prepared the statement?**

**Mahnaz Matin:** It was one of the members of the Society for Women’s Rights. She even said that they believed democrats would come to power after the revolution.

### **Can you please explain why political organisations and many men did not support these demonstrations in the name of women’s rights?**

**Mahnaz Matin:** A problem which exists is that very few Iranian intellectuals offered their opinion and most were silent. Leftist political organisations also only fleetingly reacted to this important event. The People’s Fada’iyan Guerrillas and the People’s Mojahedin both condemned the attacks against women. The Tudeh Party didn’t take any position in this regard.

Before the revolution not much thought had been given to these issues. General statements were more common and virtually everyone spoke of equal rights for men and women; that women had the right to choose what to wear seemed to follow naturally. When we agree that all human beings are equal, the equality of women and men is usually taken for granted. “Without the participation of women, no revolution will achieve victory” was always amongst the slogans. The consideration of the issue barely surpassed this level. In my view, little serious thought had been undertaken to solve the problems women faced in our society.

In the process of our research we also came to better grasp the great diversity which made up the rich mosaic of the revolutionary movement, and that a Trotskyite tendency existed in the years preceding the revolution which has been considerably understated by others who have worked on these issues. However, once we reach the revolutionary period, in spite of so much political diversity, the idea that “we must stay united” began to take precedence. Many would say, “How did the 1953 coup d’état succeed? The political forces became scattered and the United States instigated a coup”. It is thus that many reached the conclusion that they must not act or behave in a way that might provoke disunity.

Leftist forces often disdainfully referred to the middle classes as the ‘petit-bourgeoisie’. They approached modern middle class women hesitantly and didn’t take their political loyalties as settled or obvious. This perception was exacerbated by the fact that amongst the women protestors were members of the National Women’s Organisation which supported the premiership of Shapour Bakhtiar. There was often little thought for freedom within the leftist groups. They also really didn’t even think it possible that someone might tell women: “go back to your homes”. Working class women did not have a considerable presence in the 6 day



uprising and this was not very encouraging for leftist forces. The question was, if the issue of the hijab isn't a serious one for women labourers, why should it be one for communist organisations? The issues of freedom of thought and expression, were not an immediate concern for most workers, but nevertheless, shouldn't the communist political organisations have defended them?

**Nasser Mohajer:** I would like to add in parenthesis that on Sunday 11 March that the People's Fada'iyan did issue an announcement stating that no one must harass or insult women. The debate surrounding freedom however did not receive the lion's share of attention. On Monday 12 March, the People's Mojahedin also issued a statement once the demonstrations had ended. It is important to note when the most important political organisations of the day spoke out and the content of what they said. Their statements were not essentially in defence of women's rights and freedom to choose their clothing. It wasn't a condemnation of compulsory hijab. It was a condemnation of the harassment and abuse of women who refused to wear the veil.

Liberal thought in Iran has always been weak; liberal in the precise meaning of the word i.e. belief in the freedom of the individual and men and women's right to make choices in their individual and collective lives without threat of sanction or coercion. We said at the time that Bazargan was a "liberal"! But was Bazargan a liberal in the real sense of the word? Unfortunately, at the time a strong liberal movement did not exist in the country and had been enervated since the Constitutional Revolution until the revolution of 1979. Only recently have we come to witness the steady formation of a liberal current consonant with its precise meaning.

Furthermore, the Iranian left at that time had two theoretical dilemmas. One was the victory of a discourse exalting "the masses". If you speak of "the masses", especially in societies like ours, you are potentially subsuming many different kinds of classes and social strata under such a label. It might encompass pre-capitalist and dissipated layers of the old order of society, as well as those social strata and classes which emerged with capitalism's arrival to Iran, such as wage labourers, white collar workers, teachers etc. At this point one enters into a highly sensitive game. The jails of the Islamic Republic provide ample illustration of this phenomenon since the discourse of "the people" and "the masses" was something often used to break down leftists in prison. Asadollah Lajevardi, for example, was known for rhetorically asking leftist prisoners: "Who better represents the masses, you or me?! Your father is an engineer, a doctor. You live up-town. We live in the South of Tehran. Which one of us is really part of the masses, you or me?" This same concept of "the masses" or "the ordinary people" (khalq) caused confusion amongst many leftist political activists who were trying to determine the class character of those in power.

On a related note, in the last years of the Pahlavi regime many leftists, mainly from modern well to do backgrounds, tried to adopt the attire and certain attitudes of the "masses". In the universities, revolutionary men would remonstrate with girls who did not dress modestly and for instance, wore short skirts. They would wryly ask, "What kind of clothes and appearance are these? This is bourgeois!"

The problem does not just reside with our leftist organisations which were predominantly young and short on experience. The intellectuals of the epoch also don't have a positive scorecard regarding the Women's Question and the six day uprising. Not a single one of the country's prominent intellectuals defended this movement, and a perplexing question is why Iranian intellectuals remained silent regarding the protests.

**Mahnaz Matin:** The preference of many intellectuals wasn't the hijab. They held that women must dress modestly and simply; nothing more than a plain blouse and trousers. It was also preferred that girls tie up their hair, in other words, the style of leftist women in those days.

**Do you address in the book why intellectuals remained silent vis-à-vis the demonstrations?**

**Mahnaz Matin:** Yes, remarks made by Simin Daneshvar, Homa Nateq, and Islam Kazemieh are in the book. Kazemieh ridiculed the women's demonstrations and cited a verse from the Koran, adding that *ejtehad* determines the extent of the hijab. A prolific modernist writer who wasn't religious at all devolved the issue of women's veiling to *ejtehad*!

**What was the impact of the Iranian women's movement on the international women's movement?**

**Mahnaz Matin:** While in France we heard bits and pieces about the Iranian women's movement. Incidentally we saw a report by the Committee for the Defence of Women's Rights, then chaired by the French philosopher and feminist, Simone De Beauvoir. This report was not published anywhere and included the observations of the 20 member delegation of feminists who visited Iran on behalf of the committee. The members of the delegation included journalists, writers, lawyers and women's rights activists from different countries e.g. France, Italy, Germany, Egypt etc... During their trip they conversed with many high level political figures such as Bazargan, Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani etc...

After reading the report we located the members of the delegation and we spoke with them about their experiences in Iran at the time. When I telephoned them, even after some thirty years, the movement was still very much alive in their minds. They quickly welcomed our project and allowed me to interview them. They emphasised that in no other historical experience following a revolution have women mobilised so rapidly in defence of their rights. Not in the case of the European revolutions of the 19th century, nor Algeria or anywhere else. They admitted to us: "The Iranian women's movement woke us up". It was a very interesting experience for them.

Hearing all this led us to dedicate the second volume of our research to the International Solidarity of women with the women's movement in Iran. We didn't only observe the movement's impact on French women, but also amongst Americans, some of whom had gone to Iran for the first celebration of International Women's Day on 8 March 1979 following the revolution. For instance, a group of Iranian women affiliated to the Trotskyite Socialist Workers' Party had invited the renowned American feminist Kate Millet to address such a meeting in Iran. You probably know that she was in Iran for those six historic days and wrote an interesting book of her experiences called *Going to Iran*. I don't know why it still hasn't been translated into Persian. The book contains one of the best reports regarding the women's uprising in Iran, because she wrote it from the vantage point of a first-hand witness. It's very lively.

We also spoke with the women who made the film *Year Zero*. You can't imagine how passionately they spoke. They gave us the telexes they sent from Tehran to Paris during those six historic days. The famous French lawyer, Gisèle Halimi, wrote an article in *Le Monde* at the time stating: "Solidarity with the Iranian women's uprising is the first demand of internationalist feminism". This was one of the first times women had mobilised in support of the women's movement in another country.

## **Except for government pressures are there other factors which have had a role in determining the fate of women under the Islamic Republic?**

**Mahnaz Matin:** The children who have grown up under the Islamic Republic and have since become adults, whether we like it or not, have been exposed to the injunctions and ordinances of this state apparatus. The revolution of 1978-1979 brought about a legal regression for women. They have also retreated in the area of employment. Of course the level of women's employment prior to the revolution was never high, it was perhaps no more than 10-12%. This percentage has barely changed, however. This is of course while admittedly the percentage of women attending university has markedly increased. According to recent statistics the number of women attending university is now more than men. The issue is however that far less women enter the world of work. In any case, for a comprehensive answer to your question there needs to be more independent research. Nevertheless, it must be further examined to what extent the culture and practices laid down by the Islamic Republic have caused women to retreat in various economic and social spheres.

**Nasser Mohajer:** I would like to add that this issue is relevant primarily for urban women and less so for Iran's peasantry or nomadic tribes. In the longer historical term, the entry of women into the public sphere in Iran begins with the constitutional revolution. There was a segment of traditional women who after the banning of the veil by Reza Shah in 1935, retreated to their homes. You probably have heard tens of stories of how traditional women imprisoned themselves in their homes and they did not even give permission for their daughters to attend schools. Of course after the fall of Reza Shah, the ban on the hijab also fell with him, and women were free to choose whether or not to wear the veil. However in this period religious fundamentalists always strove to keep women, girls and the female members of their families aloof from the public sphere. Many of them were not even prepared to have a radio or television in their homes lest their wives and daughters be 'corrupted'. With the revolution of 1979 many of these women entered the public sphere and became active.

## **What was the difference between the activities of the independent women's movement and those of the political organisations?**

**Mahnaz Matin:** Until 1979 most Iranian political organisations did not have anything by the name of a 'women's organisation', except for the Tudeh Party which always had its own women organisations. Only when the left leaning groups which were active outside the country and primarily around the Confederation of Iranian Students, returned to Iran did they resume their activism with women. All these women organisations claimed they were independent. We see this claim reflected in a report which the newspaper Ayandegan published about these women's organisations. All of them thought of themselves as independent. It is true that their goals were equal rights, freedom, and women's liberation, but this was not the heart of their activities. These organisations were not independent in the sense we might understand it today. They were dependent on a particular ideological framework and political line which sought to explain the reasons for the oppression of women and the way in which they might be emancipated. Their emphasis was on the disinherited and strongly held that women must participate in revolutionary struggle shoulder to shoulder with men. Only thus can emancipation and equality be realised.

During the revolution a feminist movement per se did not exist. The National Union of Women which was close to the People's Fada'iyian was more or less in the same general category. It was under such circumstances that women groups in 1978-1979 endeavoured to

undertake coordinated or joint actions, such as the commemoration of International Women's Day. Later on, when the constitution of the Islamic Republic was being discussed they held conferences and announced their demands of the constitution. But the activism of these organisations was too short-lived to yield lasting results. In the all out repression of the 1980s all of them were destroyed.

### **Today more than thirty-four years have passed since the demonstrations of 8 March 1979. How do you see the state of women's struggles in Iran today?**

**Mahnaz Matin:** Today we can say that we clearly have a women's movement. This consciousness has now come into existence and the women's movement is a pillar of the Iranian people's struggle for democracy. In my opinion, one of the effects of the March 1979 movement was that it laid the foundations for this development and increased Iranian society's sensitivity to the issue of women's rights. The protests of women against the misogynistic politics of the Islamic Republic has continued in different forms, alongside the acknowledgement that women are one of the chief social forces for freedom in contemporary Iranian society. For the first time we see young men occupying an active place in the women's movement. This sensitivity which now exists has increasingly become part of our social consciousness. Nowadays few people have the courage to assert that the issue of women is marginal.

**Nasser Mohajer:** We now have more than a hundred year history of the women's movement in Iran. Last year I published a book co-edited with Ms. Banafsheh Masudi called 'The Messenger of Women's Happiness' (Peyk-e Sa'adat-e Nesvan), a women's bimonthly published in 1927-1928. We included every issue of the journal in that volume, with annotations and explanations of the ferment both before and after this important publication. In the period preceding the establishment of the regime of Reza Shah there were different women's groups and intellectual currents, which spoke of women's rights and legal equality with men and the need to change the constitution, which had many serious shortcomings with respect to women. After the establishment of Reza Shah's dictatorship, especially in the second half of his reign (1931-1941) the independent activism of women subsided. With his downfall in August-September 1941 there was another flurry of activity and in a sense an independent women's movement of sorts began to take shape. In the late forties we are witness to the widespread activism of women fighting for universal suffrage. This ferment once more subsided after the 19 August 1953 coup. It is interesting to note that there were vestiges of that movement who lobbied the Shah for women's enfranchisement in 1963.

The succeeding generations who in the years following the 1979 revolution have sought to resist many of the Islamic Republic's misogynistic policies should not forget the protracted struggles of their mothers and grandmothers. We would like to say that the new generation must not forget that it is standing on the shoulders of the generations of women which preceded it, those generations who also fought for legal equality, political freedom, respect and dignity. We have one hundred years' worth of women's struggles.

## **About the authors**

Mahnaz Matin is a medical doctor educated at the University of Tehran, who in 1983 was forced to leave Iran because of her political activities. She received her specialist medical training in Paris and currently lives and works in the French capital.

In Paris at the beginning of 1984 she began working with a feminist organisation called 'The Awakening Society', and later formed 'The Society for Women Refugees', with which she was active until the 1990s. Since that time she has not been involved in organisational work, and has instead been preoccupied with writing and researching.

She is one of the founders of the periodical Noqteh (Point) and was a member of its editorial board. In 1999 she published *The National Union of Iranian Women Revisited* by Noqteh press. Afterwards, she published 'The Inescapable Escape' (Gozir-e nagozir), with Mihan Rusta, Cyrus Javidi and Nasser Mohajer. Her latest work is 'The Uprising of Iranian Women, February 1979', published in the spring of 2013 with Nasser Mohajer.

Nasser Mohajer is a writer and researcher of contemporary Iranian history. In 1983 he left Iran for France and took up residence in Paris. In 1985 in cooperation with a number of other leftist Iranians in exile, he founded the political theoretical periodical 'New Beginning' (Aghaz-e now). He was a member of the periodical's editorial board for close to nine years. After ending his activities with 'New Beginning', he had an influential role in the formation of the journal Noqteh, which addressed political, social and cultural issues.

He has edited and published numerous books. These include, 'Leaving Purgatory: The Memoires of a Tudehi in Exile' (1993); 'In Exile: 23 Short Iranian Stories' (1997); 'And Still lives our story : The Prison Memoires of Hassan Darvish' (1998); 'From Tehran to Stalinabad: The Memoires of Mohammad Torbati' (2000); 'The Portrait of a Friend, a Sketch of a Friendship' by Hamed Shahidian (2008); and 'The Prison Book' which is a comprehensive investigation of the prisons of the Islamic Republic, published in two volumes (1998 and 2001). 'The Inescapable Escape' comprises thirty stories of escape from the Islamic Republic and was published with Mahnaz Matin and Cyrus Javidi in 2008. Following that he published with Banafsheh Masudi, "The Messenger of Women's Happiness" (Peyk-e Sa'adat-e Nesvan) in 2011, which was a periodical of the same name published by leftist Iranian women in 1927. He has been working for the last five years on his latest two volume work published with Mahnaz Matin, 'The Uprising of Iranian Women, March 1979', which came out earlier this year. In recent years, Mohajer has also published numerous other scholarly articles in the field of contemporary Iranian history.

Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi is a final year doctoral candidate at Queen's College, University of Oxford, focusing on the intellectual and political history of modern Iran.

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