

Against All Odds: The Story of a Women's Cultural Centre in Iran

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A few months ago I was invited to the Women's Cultural Center in Tehran, to learn about their activities and to see if I could contribute to the Center in any way.

"When should I come?" I asked.

"We have a workshop next week, why don't you join us then?" they replied.

The following week I arrived at the Center a bit later than the appointed time and found a woman psychologist speaking before a rapt group of about twenty women, explaining how one should conduct oneself when under interrogation.

"When you're being interrogated," she explained, "pay attention to the conditions around you. What is the atmosphere like? How are your interrogators behaving? Be conscious of the good-cop/bad-cop routine, and remember that neither of them is your friend. Remember that everyone has a breaking point, and don't condemn or belittle yourself if you feel intimidated. Their goal is to break you. Though you should pick one story and stick to it carefully, without wavering, don't try to be a hero. Everyone breaks under pressure. If you find yourself in solitary confinement, tell yourself stories to fill the mental void," and so on. Everyone listened with such attention, with looks of such studied concentration, that the room was utterly silent. There was no movement at all, save heads bending down to take notes.

As I sat there watching, I paused for a moment, and thought how interesting this was—what a rare glimpse into how women prepare themselves to be active in today's Iran. I recalled that I had promised to give a talk later in the year about women at the Wilson Center, and I couldn't think of anything more illustrative and fascinating than what I was witnessing that afternoon. Why not talk about the activities of this Women's Cultural Center?

Seeing my enthusiasm, the women who run the Center invited me to all their events, and familiarized me more intimately with what they do. Over the course of the next couple of months, I spent hours in conversation with the Center's founders and attended every event they planned. Workshops included: a training given by a young active woman lawyer who in detail worked through all the *shari'a* and civil laws regarding individuals, in particular those concerning individuals who have been incarcerated and the punishment they faced; and another training where three women explained in a detached tone their experiences of imprisonment and the effects it has had on them.

I must admit I was tremendously impressed with what the Center does, and how the women conduct themselves in the uneven and turbulent environment of Iran. I feel the work they do deserves acknowledgement, for even though it is not particularly loud, nor does it attract the West's attention with explicitly political content or aims, it is precisely through such discrete and incremental ways that women in Iran today are moving forward. The women at the Center are a

group of dynamic, tireless, and forward-looking activists in a country where everyone is blasé and apathetic, where everyone from intellectuals to taxi drivers has had it up to here with the lack of change, big or small.

If we rewind back in history to the early 1990s, to the period that came on the heels of the Iran-Iraq War, we can locate the first early cells of the Center we know today. Once the war came to an end and people were able to stop for a moment to catch their breath, they began coming together in groups. By “they,” I mean many intelligent educated women who had no intention of staying idle now that the danger of war had been lifted. They would get together in small informal groups to talk about literature, discuss the environment, trek up mountains, do sports—anything; what was important was that they came together in conscious groups, forming clay that would, unbeknownst to them, be shaped later in the future.

Now fast forward to 1997, the year President Khatami was elected. The founders of the Center were at the time active in their respective fields, and in disparate groups, such as a very active environmental organization, or a group in defense of children’s rights. Though they were active in different fields and had found different ways of taking their agenda forward, their shared and ultimate objective was change. When the reformists came to power, these women felt the social and political atmosphere was growing more hospitable to civic organizations.

In 2000, when two prominent women activists (Mehrangiz Kar and Shahla Lahiji) returned from the now infamous Berlin conference, they were arrested.¹ A number of these activist women banded together to circulate a petition in their defense, and began collecting signatures. It was the first tangible group action they had taken to defend women’s rights, and in the process, they concluded that what they needed was a center dedicated to women’s issues. Encouraged by the reform in the air and by the many NGOs sprouting up in Tehran, they decided to start what they called the Women’s Cultural Center as an NGO. The group was founded on the 8th of March 2001,² and since that year, they have commemorated the date annually with events that celebrate both their nascence and survival.

They created a board of directors, and decided first to apply for official permission, to keep their activities entirely legal. In order to secure a permit, they had to fit certain official requirements: they all had to be married, have undergraduate degrees or above from universities, be clear of any record of political or criminal activity, and submit to fingerprinting. Over the course of a year, they drafted a remarkable charter that outlined with great vision and clarity the scope of their aims and activities—raising women’s grassroots awareness through workshops, seminars, and publications (two of the ladies were publishers). The Interior Ministry rejected their request, so they turned next to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which gave them permission to function as an NGO. With this, the first public, secular women’s organization after the 1979 Islamic Revolution was born.

Although it operated as an NGO, it did so in a climate where most NGOs were actually GOs, and did everything under the oversight of the Ministry of Interior. Initially, the founders funded the Center themselves, though later they began fundraising and instituted a small membership fee for

¹ In April 2000, a conference on the Reformist victory in the February Iranian Parliamentary Elections was held in Berlin, and many Iranian reformists attended. Iranian state television broadcast excerpts from the event, including condemnations of Iran and Iranian women wearing un-Islamic dress. Conservatives were outraged and labeled the meeting “religiously prohibited” and many of the participants were arrested and tried upon their return to Iran.

² The 8th of March is International Women’s Day.

the library. The women hold events in supporters' homes, and practice great transparency in their budgeting. The Women's Cultural Center refused to accept any official oversight of its activities—an NGO in the truest sense—and suffered a great wealth of bureaucratic obstacles as a penalty for its independence.

Despite the easing of the climate under Khatami, nearly every event or activity they planned, from a conference to gathering for the 8th of March, was interrupted or shutdown by unofficial resistance, in the form of plainclothes vigilantes. Their periodical, called *Nameye-e Zan*, was banned. When they published a calendar with portraits of historically significant women, it was banned. When they applied for permission to hold a roundtable and went through all the efforts of organizing, they were notified at the eleventh hour that permission was revoked. The simplest workshop required running around in bureaucratic circles for months.

This demonstrates how many of the Center's activities, though never covered or in any way reflected in official media, began trickling out into society, how the women's voices began inserting themselves into the closed, public debate. When a serial killer began preying upon prostitutes and women of reportedly easy virtue in Mashad, and the judiciary dealt leniently with the murderer, the Center held a seminar to make people aware of the rights of the female victims. At the end, it was interrupted. All the cameras and tape recorders were confiscated. But word spread, and a small space was created for an alternative dialogue about an issue dealing with women that was confounding the nation. The killer was eventually hanged.

The Center's grassroots awareness campaign, at heart, was built around two approaches: first, workshops that taught women about their civic rights, offered them legal advice on family law and domestic violence, psychological counseling, and the like; second, a focus on the growth of a women's studies library, which forms the heart of the Center. By combining an awareness campaign with a physical space that serves as both a resource and a gathering place, the Center managed to extend its presence into the lives of its members, despite limited resources.

Often times, the founders witnessed examples of how their activism reflected itself tangibly in Iranian society. One year, the Center protested a film that aired on state television that appeared to encourage polygamy. The women held a seminar critiquing the film and wrote protest letters and articles, which proved so influential that later state television was prompted to hold its own roundtable debating the ethics of polygamy.

The Center has started up cells or groups in provinces around Iran, in Ahvaz, Isfahan, Tabriz, to name a few. They have a website (www.iftribune.com) that teaches women about the Center's activities, though the site's access was recently denied in Iran. The site attracts supporters, but so many volunteers are eager to participate already that the Center is overwhelmed trying to absorb them into its ranks. Women of all ages are attracted to the women's studies library that anchors the Center.

When you ask the women about the future, their eyes brighten and they talk about creating a private center to educate post-graduate students in women's studies. They want to forge links and network with women's groups in the region. Most importantly of all, they dream of the day when they can transform their protest movements into a project movement, because this is where their real vision lies. "Instead of always having to be in reaction, to object or condemn something or other, we eventually want our efforts to be progressive, aimed at enriching women's lives, rather than simply defending them."

What I want to stress about the women of the Center, what I found personally the most significant and inspiring, is how they have made an art of swerving around obstacles. When banned in one place, they find a venue in another. They keep moving forward, despite the frustrations, because they see no alternative. And in this, they have great strength in the growing swell of support and solidarity that follows.

At our most recent meeting, after having taken in their hopes and aspirations for the future, I thought to myself of the manner in which they have stayed the course and worked to elevate the awareness of Iranian women, throughout these painful and bitter years. I thought of their hopes for bringing about a measure of change, their steadfastness and vision, their aim of transforming protests to projects. Yet I could not help but break into their enthusiasm to ask apprehensively: “What about the present situation, when the possibility of reform has been cut short, when even to engage in the simplest activity you pursued in the past could become impossible?”

They looked at each other in turn, not as if they were unaware of what is in store for them but as if to say, “Big deal!” Suddenly, they all started to respond to me at once.

Finally, one of them who has seniority spoke quietly, forcing the others to hush, and asked me: “Have you cats?”

Puzzled, I nodded yes.

“Have you noticed how cats, when they want to settle down in an unfamiliar place, move very, very slowly, one hand and one foot at a time, until they are confident the ground beneath them is firm? I think that is how we are going to proceed in the coming months.”