# Iran's women are not afraid

The post-election crackdown has not quelled our spirit: democracy will help us achieve equality

Shirin Ebadi, The Guardian, Tuesday 6th October 2009

Iran today is
a country where women are more educated than their male compatriots; more than 60% of university students are female, as are many university professors. Iranian women obtained the right to vote and become members of parliament half a century ago – earlier than women in Switzerland, who achieved this right in 1971. Since that time at least a small number have been present in Iran's parliament. Even the present parliament, which is monopolised by hardliners, has 13 women members. In governments, women have often held senior positions. Even the health minister in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's cabinet is a woman. All this is proof that women have managed to rise within the ranks of the fundamentalists.

And yet despite the cultural, social and historical heritage of Iranian women, the Islamic Republic has imposed discriminatory regulations against them. A man may marry up to four wives and divorce them whenever he desires. But mere will is not enough for a woman to divorce her husband.

Similarly, according to Iranian law, the life of women is worth half of the man's life in terms of blood money. When drawing up compensation after an accident, women receive half the amount allocated to men. During a trial, a declaration by a man is worth twice that of a woman. Women also require their husband's permission to work, travel or leave the country.

These laws run counter to the role of women within Iranian society. Should the health minister wish to attend a meeting of the World Health Organisation, she must receive her husband's assent. It remains unclear what would happen if her husband refused – Iran's seat at the WHO might remain vacant.

The laws imposed on Iranian women are incompatible with their status and, consequently, the equality movement is very strong. Although lacking a leader, headquarters, or branches, the movement is located in the home of any Iranian who believes in equal rights for men and women.

Iranian women have chosen different ways to demonstrate their objection to this discrimination. One of the most important is the One Million

Signatures Campaign, aimed at collecting signatures from Iranian men and women to demonstrate their opposition to the discriminatory laws. It is committed to dialogue and co-operation as a means to increase and improve knowledge of discriminatory legislation.

This campaign is a peaceful protest which, unfortunately, the Iranian government has refused to tolerate. More than 50 campaigners have been prosecuted and some deprived of basic social rights, such as being able to travel freely or leave the country. The most severe sentence has been handed down to Aliyeh Eghdam Doust, who is serving a three-year prison term. She is one of the activists arrested in the June 2006 protest in support of women's rights in Haft-e-Tir Square in Tehran.

These convictions, however, have not dampened the women's determination in their struggle for equality. Following the June presidential elections, women of all ages took part in demonstrations against the official results. Armed forces shot dead a young woman, Neda Soltan. She has now become a symbol of the Iranian demand for democracy. Women are at the forefront of this struggle, well aware that they will obtain equality only within a truly democratic political order.