Paradoxes of transnational space and local activism: Iranians organizing across borders

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Abstract: The Iranian revolution of 1979 promised to bring freedom and equality, but as soon as one group gained power, it turned out to be oppressive of both its political opposition and women. This resulted in the formation of a large Iranian diaspora bound together by its hatred for the Iranian regime. Years of suppression in the 1980s in Iran resulted in a deep gap between Iranians living inside and outside Iran. During the 1990s, however, cross-border relationships started to change as a result of two major factors: transnational activities and the influence of cyberspace. This paper focuses on the paradoxes of transnational connections in local protest with a focus on the women's movement. We show both how transnational links have empowered women activists in Iran and how they have led to new dangers at the local level. We also reveal how support from the Iranian diaspora can be patronizing as well as supportive.

Keywords: cyberspace, Iranian diaspora, Iranian revolution, Iranian women's movement, Iranian Women's Studies Foundation

We live in a world where seemingly stable cultural and social boundaries are now constantly affected by a crosscurrent of information, images, people, goods, and capital (Pourmehdi 2001). This era of globalization has prepared the groundwork for the emergence of newly constructed forms of local and/or transnational cultural 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). In our view, transnationalism is more than cross-border interactions: it is about the ways that the local space gets redefined through transnational activities and vice versa. As local and transnational spaces begin to overlap and interact, one of the actors often becomes the nation-state itself. It is often assumed that the nation-state is weakened through transnational activities yet in this article we show that the influence of the state can be a crucial factor in the ways that both transnational and local spaces get constructed. The central theme of this article is the changing influence of the state on the ways that transnational alliances are formed along with the influence of transnational space on local power relations. We focus on the women's movement in Iran to elaborate on the paradoxes of transnational space. We do that by discussing the enabling aspects of

transnationalism alongside its possible limitations and even dangers. The main actors considered in this paper are women's NGOs and activists within Iran, the Iranian diaspora, and the Iranian state.

As Vertovec (2001) rightly argues, transnationalism is interwoven with the notion of identity. Transnational exchange is based on the construction of a 'common identity'. Although common, this identity is far from uniform. It is often negotiated and even contested. It is this contested notion of identity within the transnational framework that is the interest of our article. We present the shifting and even conflicting identities of Iranian women activists within Iran and within the diaspora along with their various claims on activism and feminism. Furthermore, we will elaborate the role of what Castells (1996) calls 'the information society' and its impact with a particular focus on the internet and its effects on women's activism within Iranian local/transnational space.

In spite of its initial ideals of freedom and equality, the Iranian revolution of 1979 turned out to be oppressive both of its political opposition and of women. The first half of the 1980s can be considered as one of the most oppressive periods in the recent history of Iran. In that same period, the war with Iraq (1980–88) started. Combined with the political oppression of the revolutionary regime, the war resulted in the closing of national borders for several years. When the borders re-opened in the mid-1980s, a large number of Iranians had been smuggled across borders and had started new lives elsewhere. The physical opening of the Iranian borders did not result in much more trans-border movement either physically or virtually. During these years the image of the new Iran was so negative that it became almost impossible for Iranians to obtain travel visas from any Western country even if they were able to acquire legal travel documents from the Iranian regime. The result was that a large number of the Iranian diaspora—estimated between one and four million—left Iran either with illegal exit documents or with illegitimate entry documents. In addition, its isolation meant that Iran was left

behind in terms of technological developments. The war, the regime, and the isolation of Iran, resulted in a kind of 'forced' physical and virtual separation from the rest of the world. This had undeniable effects on the Iranians who left Iran and the ones who stayed.

In the 1980s, the nation-state significantly limited the transnational space for activism in Iran. In those years of isolation and suppression, activists in Iran did not have much access to the world beyond their limited locality. Limitations were eased in the years following the end of the Iran-Iraq war. By the 1990s, access to developing transnational spaces restricted the forces of the nation-state through the ways that local protest was empowered and organized. Transnational space meant an opening to a new world for women activists who felt limited for years in their rather closed local environment. Access to the internet and a newly formed connection with the Iranian diaspora were responsible for opening this new transnational space. By the end of the 1990s, the borders of the nation-state started to open up both physically and virtually. This opening of the transnational space has been both enabling and limiting for the local protest movements in Iran.

The limitations produced by the newly opened transnational space were partly a result of the deep gap between local Iranian activists and the Iranian diaspora caused by the 'forced' years of separation during the 1980s. Hatred of the Iranian regime for years served as the binding factor for a rather heterogeneous Iranian diaspora. For women, anger against the regime was political as well as gender-related because of gender-specific violence. Hatred and anger toward the Iranian regime long remained an essential part of diasporic identity. Iranians inside Iran, however, struggled in many ways to improve their positions within the limiting space of the Islamic republic. In the 1990s, this resulted in the formation of a limited form of civil society within the context of the political reformist movement in Iran. NGOs started their struggle to become independent of the state, and activists started to claim, although with fear, as much space as possible to express their ideas. Despite the changes

in Iran, the gap between Iranians inside and outside remained wide in the 1990s. On the one hand, the diaspora's memory of a suppressive situation in Iran made them suspicious of any kind of activism from within the country. On the other hand, Iranian activists inside felt ignored and distrusted the judgment of those living in the diaspora because they believed that this group had been away too long and was too far away to know the true situation. This mutual distance and distrust hindered contacts for some time. In this article we will show how and why these positions changed over time.

In terms of the topic of this article, the authors are both in an interesting position. Both of us were active participants during the Iranian revolution, and both of us have leftist backgrounds. Nayereh Tavakoli remained in Iran and has spent her life defending the rights of women inside Iran. Halleh Ghorashi left Iran in 1988 as a political refugee and has lived in the Netherlands ever since. It is not by accident that a piece on voices inside and outside of Iran is written by women positioned inside and outside. In the following part of this paper we will summarize the history of the women's movement in Iran, elaborate on activities inside and outside Iran, and describe the shifting patterns of transnational connections over the past decade.

Women before and after the revolution of 1979

The modernization efforts of both Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza resulted in some—albeit controversial—benefits for women. The most controversial of those has been the compulsory unveiling of women in public in 1936. Iranian women were to become the symbol of the modern Iran Reza Shah had in mind. In the 1960s, Mohammad Reza Shah continued these modernization policies for example by, in 1963, extending the right to vote to women. The Family Protection Law of 1967, which offered increased protection in cases of divorce and custody of children, was revised to allow free abortion on

demand (1974), install a ban on polygyny, and give women the right to alimony after divorce (1976). But the suppressive character of this regime did not allow for independent women's activities.[1] In spite of these limitations, women's activism did not stop in Iran when independent women's organizations were abolished. The activism prior to the revolution led to a considerable participation of women in the revolution and their social, intellectual, and political involvement in those years. The modernizing process also had contributed to the formation of a rather powerful middle class, mainly constituting of government employees, intellectuals, and university students (Tavakoli 2004).

Women played an important role in protests against the Pahlavi regime.[2] The images of thousands of women with their children shouting slogans against the Pahlavi regime in the streets of Iranian cities surprised many around the world. A month after the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime, women were marching again. The first and largest protest by Iranian women was against compulsory veiling. Women with a wide variety of backgrounds (intellectuals, royalists, government employees, university, school students, and members of political groups) were shocked and confused by the decision to enforce veiling, and they took to the streets to protest. However, the protests were not enough to prevent the new rulers from gradually restricting women's freedoms. Compulsory veiling was the first step, other restrictions followed. The Family Protection Law for example was abolished and this meant that women not only lost the limited legal benefits that they had enjoyed during the former regime, but were also subjected to diminished legal rights in matters of divorce and inheritance. Moreover, polygyny was again legalized and all female judges and lawyers were dismissed (Saadatmand 1995).

These changes made the majority of women even more progressive and vocal in claiming their rights. They did their best to maintain their presence in social life and continued to combat exclusion. Women knew that if they were excluded they could be easily subjected to the most violent

law codes. Thus their first combat was to maintain their presence in the public arena. During their participation in the revolution women experienced a taste of freedom to decide about the political, social, cultural, and sexual aspects of their lives. These experiences also led to a redefinition of gender identity. Hence, Iranian women, who were 'modernized' before the revolution and empowered during the revolution, struggled to stay present in the public domain. This resulted in a redefinition of gender roles and identities.

The first evidence of such change is the growing number of women in the workforce, gaining economic independence. Tavakoli's research at her workplace on non-scientific staff of the University of Payam-e Noor and the Center for University Press, shows that the number of unmarried women living separated from their parental family is increasing. She discovered that among the interviewed group, fifty percent of unmarried women over the age of thirty-five lived on their own, in houses they bought from their own salaries. This seems to indicate a shift away from the traditional gender roles that determine that women cannot live alone and thus in the absence of their husbands must either live with his family or their own.

Secondly, there has been an increase in the number of female students admitted in universities. In the year 2004, the number of female participants taking the entrance examination for university admittance in Iran was over 1,160,000, while the number of male participants was 766,000.[3] This high number of female participants is amazing for a country in which seventy years earlier no girls were admitted to schools. This has led to the high participation of women in fields such as merchandising, engineering, writing, journalism, film directing, and photography. Men dominated these fields until three decades ago.

The third evidence of change has been the extensive growth of the women's movement in Iran. Women have published many books and journals. For example, in 2003, *Zanan* (women) magazine celebrated its eleventh anniversary. This is a unique event in a country in which non-

governmental journals and newspapers have a short life span because of government banning and censorship. In the realm of politics, the percentage of female representatives in the sixth parliament of Iran (the previous parliament) for the first time in Iranian history came close to representing voices of Iranian women. MPs such as Fatemeh Haqiqatjoo, Elahe Koolaee, and Akram Mosavarimenesh for example stood for joining the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and together with other female MPs tried hard to pass laws in favor of women. Despite the fact that the Guardian Council—superior to the Parliament—vetoed most of the achievements proposed by these women in the parliament, the latter's efforts to raise women's issues and pass women-friendly laws was remarkable. In addition to these activities, the growing number of NGOs that focuses on women's issues has been another example of the blooming women's movement in Iran during the 1990s.

The women's movement in the 1990s

The years of repression in the 1980s hampered women's activities but could not stop them entirely. Many leftist activists, both inside and outside Iran, who did not call themselves feminists during the revolution, became strong advocates for women's rights. These convinced secular feminists partly transferred their political leftist ideals to a passion for feminism (Ghorashi 2003a). However there was a difference between those who stayed inside Iran and those who left. Within the Iranian Islamic framework of the 1980s, it had been impossible for feminists to publicly display their secular identities. For this reason many of those who stayed in Iran adopted the label of Islamic feminist, while their counterparts outside Iran continued to refer to themselves as secular feminists.[4] It was only in the 1990s that a space was created for secular feminists to claim secularism publicly. In those years, feminists inside of Iran, both Islamic and secular, started to collaborate and became strong advo-

cates for reform and the improvement of women's conditions in Iran. For example in *Zanan,* Shirin Ebadi (an Islamic feminist) and Mehrangiz Kar (a secular feminist)[5] wrote many articles in which women were informed about their legal rights. "*Zanan's* willingness to join forces with secular feminists to protest against the gender biases of a law which is derived from the *shari'a* is indeed novel in post-revolutionary politics" (Mir-Hosseini 1996: 306).

During the same period, in 1991, the Women's Cultural Center was founded. Many of the members of this group have been active within different women's magazines such as *Jens-e dovom* (Second sex) and *Fasl-e zanan* (The season of women). The Women's Cultural Center has been extremely active on various issues related to women's conditions, organizing Celebrations of International Woman's Day on March 8 each year, seminars and conferences regarding such issues as the killing of street women, Afghan women in exile (in Iran), and domestic violence, and the publication of a Newsletter *Namey-e zan* (woman's letter). One of the most important activities of the center has been the call for the establishment of the first, non-governmental library specializing in women. In 2003, after the ban on their Newsletter, the center began an on-line version of it, *IFTribune.*[6]

The changes that have taken place in Iran are tangible results of women's struggles to claim their space. That said, many members of the Iranian diaspora did not witness these changes because they left Iran during the 1980s, the years characterized by many as 'the dark years of suppression'. The necessarily limited communication between activists abroad and activists within Iran at the time, left Diaspora Iranians unaware of the developments in Iran. The memories of those years of suppression remained vivid in the minds of diaspora Iranians. They could not imagine that there had been any changes. It was this image of Iran as ultimately suppressive that held sway over the Iranian diaspora and influenced their understanding of the changes in Iran. In order to understand this particular diasporic positioning, we elaborate on the situation in the 1980s in the following section.

Remembering the revolution

During 1979–81, the two years following the revolution of 1979 that are often referred to as 'the spring of freedom', a number of political groups came into existence. At that time those groups were permitted by law. These groups advanced a wide range of ideologies, including forms of Marxism, Islamism, liberalism, and women's rights. Both the extent of the freedom enjoyed during these years and the opportunity for political involvement meant that Iranian women were extensively participating in the political changes of their country for the first time.

After the revolution, scenes in the streets changed drastically. This was especially true in front of the University of Tehran. Bookshops were filled with books that were previously illegal. In front of these shops, stands displayed newly printed books, tapes of revolutionary music, and a multitude of newspapers from diverse political groups. In front of almost every stand a group of people discussed political issues and plans for the future of the country. Men and women of all ages and classes took part in passionate debates. One of the women living in diaspora explains this period as follows:

"My sister told me once: 'history has given us an intensive course', and she was right. When I look back, I see that the intensity of the events then was so great that you felt as if those events happened in thirty years: those years were so intense. Those were great years, and I always look forward to having another time like that."[7]

Those years of freedom were beautiful, but they did not last. Years full of hope and optimism changed to years full of fear and emptiness: a period called 'the years of suppression' by many. In the first months after the revolution, various political groups began clashing. Although people were free to demonstrate and discuss in the streets, disagreements gradually took on more virulent forms. Occasional violent confrontations led to a decisive change of power in June 1981. From that time onward, brutal and bloody scenes dominated the streets of Iran, especially in Teh-

ran. Those who opposed the Islamists in power remember those days and the years that followed as hell, while the first years of the revolution were associated with paradise. The symbolic use of paradise and hell to describe those events may seem somewhat exaggerated; however, this is the way many activists remember those years. This change from years of activity and possibility to years of silence, fear, and passivity had a strong psychological impact on women. Many expressed feelings of depression, saying they felt dead or lost.

These earlier experiences of many women now in diaspora affected them in diverse ways. For many, new ideals replaced old political ideals. These new ideals included the wish to make at least a small contribution to changing the world. For this reason most Iranian women in diaspora became quite active in human, women, and children's rights issues. It is the memories of the years of suppression in Iran and the urge for activism in the present that characterizes the majority of Iranian women in diaspora and it is from this context that their reaction to activism in Iran can be understood. Shared political pasts could have served as a possible binding factor between Iranian women activists inside and outside Iran. Instead it is the years of separation during the 1980s that have dominated the interactions between the two. Even though both groups of activists claim women's rights and feminism as their driving force, this has not been enough for a healthy interaction between the two. We will illustrate this by presenting the case of a transnational Iranian women's organization in which, over the past decade, the tensions between the activists inside and outside have been central.

The Iranian Women's Studies Foundation

One of the most active Iranian diaspora organizations on women's issues has been the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation (IWSF).[8] The aim of this transnational organization has been to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas on issues related to Iranian women. The first IWSF conference was held in 1990 at Cambridge in the United States. Since then, the foundation has been involved in organizing annual conferences on women's issues all over the world. Every year hundreds of Iranian women residing in various countries attend this three-day conference. The conference has taken place in various cities, primarily in the United States and Canada (Los Angeles, Berkeley, Denver), but recently in European cities as well (Paris, Stockholm, London, Berlin). The program of the conference consists of lectures, discussions, cultural presentations, and informal gatherings. Depending on the theme of the conference, activists from Iran or from its diaspora as well as well-known non-Iranian feminists are invited to give lectures.

The themes of the IWSF conferences, the programs, and the location change each year. What has remained consistent is the passion of the organizers and the great tension between diverse points of views on women's issues. Since the first conferences, there have been several incidents in which activists from Iran were verbally attacked by some of those living in the diaspora. These attacks were mainly based on positions taken but were also partly due to the fact that those participants from Iran were wearing headscarves. In addition, there has been a growing gap between activists and scholars during IWSF conferences. This gap has grown because most of the Iranian scholars living outside Iran have begun to notice the activities and the space created in Iran as a new opening and have written about Islamic feminism. Some of the Iranian activists living in diaspora who firmly opposed the existence of Islamic feminism in Iran did not appreciate the position taken by the Iranian scholars in diaspora. After presenting their work some scholars were openly attacked, labeled as postmodernist, and marginalized by the activists.[9] This tension has grown, and every year there has been a new occasion for conflict in the conference.

Each year during the conference there is an election of and a prize given to the 'woman of the year'. During the 1997 IWSF conference in Paris this prize went to Ms. Mehrangiz Dolatshahi who had been a defender of women's rights

and member of the Iranian parliament during the Pahlavi period. This choice for the 'woman of the year' caused much anger and open criticism by many leftist activists. Some even left the room during the ceremony and the days that followed were characterized by serious discussions of the issue. During the 2003 IWSF conference in London, Mehrangiz Kar, a lawyer and women's right activist who became famous for her writing on women's rights in Iran, was nominated. The majority of Iranians, even in diaspora, consider Ms. Kar to have been one of the most important voices of opposition inside Iran during the 1990s. Yet this recognition did not prevent critics from again raising their voices loudly when Ms. Kar was awarded the 'woman of the year' prize in 2003. One of the participants of that conference expressed her view on this matter as follows:

"When Ms. Kar was chosen as the woman of the year, I did not think that anybody would protest. But there were again some leftist activists who were against this. There was a strong protest when the prize was handed out to the person who replaced Ms. Kar during the ceremony.[10] Then something nice happened. A very young girl who was probably born in England went behind the microphone and raised her voice against the protestors. She said that the reason she was now part of the women's movement is the work of Mehrangiz Kar and that these are the women who have been working in Iran and had gone to prison. During her talk she started crying. I then, felt the disease we have by living outside Iran for so long; I mean this terrible leftist disease. We are working really hard but we have become narrow-minded: the young people's view is much more open than ours. Those leftists were saying that Mehrangiz Kar is a betrayer, because she had been working with the regime. This is absurd. The only reason for their accusations is that she has been able to work as a lawyer in Iran and has had her own office. For these people, someone who had stayed in Iran, no matter what that person had been doing, whether that person had been in prison or not, had been raising her voice or not; simply the fact that the

person had stayed in Iran is already the symbol of her/his betrayal."

Nayereh Tavakoli was one of the invitees from Iran for the IWSF conference in London. She was shocked by the way that some of the Iranians living outside reacted to her presence:

"The interaction of the audience was, more or less, affected by the few numbers of people who behaved and talked like Berlin Conference guys.[11] They condemned everything. For example, they condemned local music, which was performed by a group of women; they condemned the film *Women's prison,* by Manijeh Hekmat, and accused her of propagating the benefits of Islamic regime. I tried to present my lecture with irony and succeeded to attract the audience so much that no one dared to raise any objection immediately, but on the last day of the conference, one of them attacked me indirectly by saying to the chairwoman: 'please, when you invite people from Iran to give lectures, invite those who have no high positions in the government, so that they can be comfortable in attacking the regime'. That was quite humiliating because I was the only person invited from Iran, and it meant that I was a hypocrite and was afraid to talk about my ideas. When I saw that not one of the organizers or the chairwoman defended me, I left the session to show my resentment. Later I heard that a friend mentioned this point to the organizers, and the chairwoman raised the issue on the plenary session. Yet it is important to note that there were many women in the audience who appreciated my presence and our activities given the difficult situation in Iran."

These kinds of incidents, frictions between activists and scholars, and uneasiness, even distrust, between activists from Iran and from the diaspora have been consistently present during the IWSF conferences. The 2004 IWSF conference, which also marked its fifteenth anniversary, took place in June in Berlin. The most intriguing part of this conference was that the whole program was broadcast through internet via 'Paltalk'.[12] Unlike for activists living in the diaspora, it is

rather difficult for Iranian activists living in Iran to attend the conference if they are not invited as a guest to the conference. This has to do with difficulties obtaining visas and providing the expenses related to the conference. The internet broadcast brought a new dimension to the transnational character of the conference, making it much more available for Iranians inside Iran. But also, interviews with different women who had been attending IWSF conferences for years made it clear that this conference in Berlin was considered as the best by many, because there were less conflicts than at other conferences. From different conversations and observations made during the conference in Berlin it occurred to Ghorashi that more room had been created within the Iranian diaspora for different opinions: especially with regard to the developments in Iran. 'Leftist hardliners' were still present but their presence had become somehow marginalized compared to previous years. In our view, this change can be explained by two factors: increasing interactions with Iran during the course of the last decade and a major event that occurred in the year 2000.

Localized impact of transnational links

In April 2000, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and the Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt in Berlin organized the conference "Iran after the elections", on civil society and the reform process in Iran. The aim of the conference was to bring Iranian intellectuals, politicians, and artists inside and outside Iran together and review the latest developments in Iran. The conference soon changed into a violent political arena when a group of Iranian opposition from the diaspora, disrupted the meetings by shouting slogans and preventing the participants from speaking. This act of opposition was followed by other actions such as a striptease by a woman and a man; a scene that was repeatedly shown on national television in Iran. The conservatives in power in Iran used this incident to show that during the conference, Islam and the Islamic republic were offended. Among the participants of the conference from

Iran were human rights activist and lawyer Mehrangiz Kar, journalist and editor of *Zanan* Shahla Sherkat, outspoken reformist cleric Hojatoleslam Hasan Yusefi-Eshkevari, elected MP (of the sixth parliament) from Tehran and journalist Jamileh Kadivar, journalist and researcher Akbar Ganji, publisher and human rights activist Shahla Lahiji, in addition to famous writers Mahmoud Dolatabadi and Mohammad Ali Sepanlou.

Upon their return to Iran, a revolutionary court in Tehran sentenced these participants for attending the conference in Berlin. Many of the activists were sentenced to several years in prison; some are still serving their sentences. This clash between Iranian reformists and activists from Iran on the one hand and Iranian 'hardliners' in the diaspora on the other, resulted in a very painful situation. Iranian activists who had been risking their lives in Iran were attacked both by Iranian activists living in diaspora and the conservative powers in Iran. This event resulted in many discussions inside and outside Iran. These discussions, in turn, led to reflections on the positions taken by many members of the Iranian diaspora. The price was high, but this incident alerted the Iranian diaspora to the changes in Iran, and some factions started to re-evaluate their previous positions. This incident is an example of the paradoxical impact of transnational space for activists within Iran. It shows how transnational connections and incidents could be used by the state in order to limit the space for local activism. On the other hand, transnational allies have also proved essential for the support and safeguarding of civil society in Iran. Having access to the transnational space has been crucial for activists in Iran during the past decade. Transnational connections among Iranian NGOs and non-Iranian organizations and the organization of Beijing + 5 Women 2000 in Iran[13] were sources of inspiration for local activism. Furthermore, the awarding of the Nobel Peace prize to Shirin Ebadi brought new self-confidence and self-esteem to Iranian women who had fought a twenty-five-year battle to claim their rights and their space.

Since the end of 1990s, the changing political sphere in Iran, encouraged or simply tolerated

by the reformists in power such as ex-President Khatami, contributed to a limited physical and an active virtual openness toward the rest of the world. The West became hopeful of the possibility of fulfilling Khatami's promise of a 'dialogue between the civilizations' and watched patiently for political change in Iran. In this period a transnational virtual space, fuelled by satellite TV and the internet, became increasingly important for local actions. Activists inside Iran have used the internet as a source of information and communication among themselves and with the Iranian diaspora. In this way numerous actions have been organized through the internet. Information from inside has enabled many women in the diaspora to actively spread the 'voice inside' to the wider world. Activists have done their best to mobilize international human rights organizations and media against the situation in Iran. Some of these actions have been more effective than others, yet the fact that activists inside feel they have active allies outside Iran is a great achievement in and of itself. There are several examples in this regard.

There have been many protest movements on the internet against domestic or public violence against women in Iran. News is spread about women being tortured or beaten by their husbands or being treated cruelly in the courts or prisons. An example is the media attention for the case of Zahra Kazemi, the Iranian-Canadian journalist who, in 2004, was tortured and killed in prison in Iran. Another example is the coverage of the disrespectful way that the delegates of Iranian NGOs were treated in Mehrabad airport in Iran after their return from participating in the Asian Beijing +10 seminar.[14]

There have been many actions against women's executions in Iran. A successful action was the one against the death penalty for Afsaneh Nouroozy, who had killed an intelligence officer in self-defense. The death penalty was reduced and she was released from prison on 28 January 2005. There has also been a huge protest against the execution of a sixteen-year-old girl called Atefeh. She was hung publicly for having sexual affairs. The international coverage of both cases was enormous and the joint work of Iranian

activists inside and outside played a decisive role in this broad coverage. These are just a few examples of the many transnational actions strengthening local protest in Iran.

Despite a growing body of literature critical of the exaggerated possibilities of the internet (e.g., Wilson and Peterson 2002), we argue that the new space created by the internet has been essential for local activism. It has enabled local activists to enter a transnational virtual space. This virtual access is essential because the local space for action and trans-border movement is limited. Furthermore, this line of communication has created the possibility for transnational connections among Iranians all over the world. In the past decade, Iranians have proven to be one of the most active groups using the internet (Graham and Khosravi 2002). Many organizations are involved in arranging interviews and discussion programs on the Net, for example via Paltalk. An example was Women's Day in 2004, when prominent Iranian feminists from all over the world used the Net to discuss issues related to women and science, art, politics, and sexuality. Also, as mentioned above, the last IWSF conference in Berlin was broadcast through Paltalk which made it possible for Iranian women from all around the world to be part of the conference. Iranians in Iran find it especially interesting to listen to these programs because it gives them an alternative channel of information. In addition, different Iranian e-journals, such as www.iranian.com, provide space for transnational discussions among Iranians. Also, Web logs (web diaries) or 'blogs' are a very important form of communication for Iranians living in Iran and abroad. There were 400,000 people on the internet in Iran in 2001, according to government figures. Officials expect this to grow to fifteen million over the next three to four years (Hermida in *BBC News Online,* 17 June 2002). Many of the users are women. There are 12,000 Persian Web logs in Iran, which is unique in the Islamic Middle East (hoder.com[15]). The Web is providing a way for women in Iran to talk freely about taboos.

Next to these Web logs, there are three very important and effective women's sites. These sites play a crucial role in communication among

women and in organizing activities: womeniniran
.org, iftribune.com, and hastia.org. The sites
provide news, inform on women's activities, and
present analytical papers, all of which have a
protesting nature. In addition to the news on
regular programs, the internet has also been cru-
cial for organizing urgent gatherings such as an
announcement to protest against the US attack
on Iraq just before the beginning of the war.
This gathering was held in a large park in Teh-
ran and many, mostly young, women and men
attended it. In this way, the internet enabled an
entrance into a space in which the local and the
transnational overlap. This access to a new space
seems to be empowering for women for several
reasons. First of all, they feel supported by fem-
inists all over the world. Secondly, this space
makes it possible for them to learn from other
experiences and ideas. Thirdly, they can show the
world that they are active participants of their
society and not passive victims of violence and
suppression. In this way, they affect the prevailing
view regarding women from Islamic countries.

One of the signs of the growing space cre-
ated by transnationalism is the rapid growth of
independent women's NGOs in Iran and their
extensive activities. The leader of the Women's
Participation Center in Iran has reported a
growth rate of 318 percent for women's NGOs
(*Shargh, 27* July 2004). This growth and the aims
pursued have frightened the conservative pow-
ers in Iran. The conservative newspaper *Jom-
hoory Eslami* (17–26 October 2004) noted that
the growth of women's NGOs was a great threat
to Islam and Islamic government. In addition to
NGOs, the new media have been under attack by
conservatives as well. Some Web logs were closed
and the operators arrested or threatened. This
shows again that transnational links can be at-
tacked by the state at the local level when they
are considered threatening. Yet it is impossible
to ban and control cyberspace completely
through the limited resources of one nation-
state. It is this relative fluidity of cyberspace that
makes it a powerful medium for transnational
connections in support of local protest. Once
local activists have used transnational space for
their actions, it becomes harder for the state to

suppress it. It is this aspect of transnational space
which gives local protest hope. That said, it is es-
sential to be wary of the negative consequences
for local activism. This is especially true in the
light of the new era which is dominated in
Chomsky's (1999) terms by 'military humanism'.
Military humanism justifies the transnational
'export of democracy' to other parts of world.
In light of this, it would be naive to ignore the
endangering and patronizing side of transna-
tional space for local protest.

A new challenge for the diaspora

Despite the limitations in Iran, during the past
two decades Iranian women have been able to
re-evaluate their gender position and organize
themselves in various ways to protect their
rights. New media have made it possible for
these women to break out of the limiting space
of their country and access the rest of the world.
Cyberspace has proven crucial in combining the
local with the transnational. In fact, it is some-
times the only space that women living in Iran
can escape to in order to express themselves
freely, to collect information, to reach other, dias-
pora Iranians, and the rest of the world.

It took years for the Iranian diaspora to ac-
cept the existence of activism in Iran. Yet we
have shown that this acceptance often goes
hand-in-hand with clashes that can actually en-
danger the lives of activists in Iran. After the
years of 'frozen images' of Iran, the Iranian di-
aspora have recently become conscious of their
role as possible allies for local activists in Iran.
However, the Iranian diaspora need to tread
carefully when seeking to export their own ver-
sion of democracy to Iran. They also need to
guard against becoming too enthusiastic about
inviting Iranian activists abroad for lectures and
an exchange of ideas without taking into ac-
count the fact that these activists have to go
back to Iran where they may face penalties for
their actions abroad. When local activists get in-
volved in transnational space they often have to
pay a price, especially when their entrance to
transnational space involves the physical cross-

ing of the national borders of Iran. Since the fall of 2004, many activists who have gone to international conferences or meetings are either arrested upon their return to Iran or are forced to limit their activities. Some are not even allowed to leave the country once their imminent departure from Iran becomes known. On its Web site, Amnesty International (2004) reports:

"On 4 October 2004, Emaddedin Baghi [human rights activist] was scheduled to travel to North America and Europe where he was going to take part in international human rights conferences. Having received the exit stamp at the immigration desk at Tehran airport, he, his wife and daughters proceeded to board the aircraft when, suddenly they were escorted to a small room, their luggage retrieved from the aircraft, emptied out and—finally—Emaddedin Baqi's passport was confiscated."

Another example is that Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh (formerly known as Mahboubeh Ommi), the editor of *Farzaneh* magazine (a women's magazine), was detained on 1 November 2004 upon her return from London, where she took part in the European Social Forum. Police searched her Tehran home, confiscating her computer hard drive and other items.[16] She was released on bail about a month later. In a recent example, the Iranian-Dutch member of the Dutch parliament, Farah Karimi was interrogated and insulted at the Tehran airport in May 2005 as she was leaving Iran after a short stay. The speculation is that the reason behind this interrogation is that Ms. Karimi has succeeded to convince the Dutch government to support an Iranian satellite TV station that will be launched by Iranian journalists in exile. This is yet another example that shows the fear of the Iranian conservatives of the impact of the new media on Iran.

Once Iranian women in Iran witnessed cruel violence against them and felt helpless because they could not raise their voices publicly. Now, through the advent of new media they have a space in which transnational and local activities overlap. This enables them to both organize efficiently and mobilize internally, in addition to reaching the world and their counterparts in the diaspora. This transnational space is the guarantee that their voices will be heard worldwide. Yet access to this new space seems to be less free and open than often assumed. Many writers of Web logs who felt a sense of freedom in cyberspace were arrested and their blogs were closed. In addition the transnational connection with the Iranian diaspora seemed to be anything but uncontested. The gap between the two groups created misunderstandings and distrust from both sides. The Iranian diaspora living in the West and influenced by the dominant idea of exporting democracy, connected with their 'home' in a rather patronizing manner. Although quite critical of the American invasion in Iraq and its goal of exporting 'democracy', some Iranians in diaspora have adopted the same patronizing tone toward Iran and its home-grown activists. This group of diaspora Iranians has not been understanding of the pace and the path of local actions and have thereby at times endangered local activists inside Iran as well as insulting them at meetings outside Iran. This in turn has sometimes made local Iranian activists wary of transnational connections with the Iranian diaspora.

New challenges are a fact of life. In light of fresh attacks from the conservative power structure on activists in Iran and the election of a conservative president in June 2005, the Iranian diaspora is challenged to be even more aware of the consequences of their actions. They need to be reflective about their standpoints on democracy and freedom. Activists in Iran in turn need to be aware of the paradoxical effects of transnational space for their local activism and the way it redefines local power relations, thus necessitating the constant redefinition of forms of action. After years of physical and virtual separation, the impacts of transnational space pose new challenges for Iranian activists to reshape their local actions.

Acknowledgments

pers during the conference on "Transnational aspects of localized conflict and protest," and Marja Spierenburg and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on the earlier drafts of this article. We also would like to thank other participants of the conference for a very stimulating discussion and atmosphere.

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Notes

1. See for discussions on this point Afary (1996), Afkhami (1994), Najambadi (1991), and Paidar (1995).
2. The first shah of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79).
3. See the Iranian Students News Agency Web site: http://www.isna.net.
4. For differentiation within feminist movement in Iran see Ghorashi (1996).

5. Shirin Ebadi is the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize 2004 and Mehrangiz Kar is a lawyer living in those years in Iran who is now living in abroad because of her medical condition (for more see Mir-Hosseini 1996; Najmabadi 1998).
6. For more of the center's activities see www.iftribune.com.
7. See for more Ghorashi (2003b).
8. See for more www.iwsf.com.
9. This information is based on several informal talks with different scholars by Ghorashi throughout the years, and her observations during the conference in Berlin.
10. Ms. Kar did not attend the conference, due to health problems.
11. We will elaborate on this point in the following section.
12. Paltalk is a new electronic medium which allows the users to see, hear, and share files with anyone, anywhere in the world. This program is used by Iranians all around the world to participate and organize discussions on various themes.
13. Five years after the famous Beijing Women's Conference of 1995, the UN Division for the Advancement of Women called another Special Session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: Gender equality, development, and peace for the twenty-first century", held from 5–9 June at the UN headquaters in New York. It was also known as Beijing +5 Women 2000.
14. Asia Pacific Forum by NGOs for Women's empowerment and gender equality to commemorate the 1995 Beijing Conference on 1–3 July 2004 in Bangkok.
15. On www.hoder.com/blogtalk_pres_hoder.doc.
16. Information obtained from the action by Reporters without Borders.

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