INTERVIEWS 16.09.2024

‘Iranian society is far ahead of its current laws’

Two years after Mahsa Amini’s death, women’s rights advocate Sussan Tahmasebi explains what has happened in Iranian society since

Two years ago today, 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman Jina Mahsa Amini died in the custody of the morality police, sparking one of the largest protests since the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Although brutally suppressed by the security forces, the Woman, Life, Freedom movement left a deep mark on the country. What specific changes can we observe two years after its inception?

It is important to note that the Woman Life Freedom protests were the largest and, for the first time, sustained nationwide protests with a strong focus on women’s rights. Over the past decades, we have witnessed protests in support of women’s rights in Iran, but never on this scale. These protests demonstrated the level of awareness among Iranians with respect to women’s rights, particularly concerning their bodily autonomy and integrity. Although the protests started out with a primary focus on women’s rights, they quickly escalated to demand much broader fundamental rights and freedoms. We have seen that ordinary people are willing to fight for these changes.

Regarding the mandatory hijab, which was one of the main issues at the centre of the protests, we can indeed see significant changes in the urban landscapes of Iranian cities. Women are reclaiming their bodily autonomy by simply choosing not to wear the headscarf. While still illegal under the law, they do so nonetheless — on sidewalks, in malls, in their cars. They risk much, but are determined to express their newfound freedom and self-determination over their bodies. In more rural areas, women are also pushing the red lines of both what is imposed upon them by the government, but also by their culture and tradition. They are dressing more freely and are discussing their rights to bodily autonomy more regularly within their families and other social settings.

Has the movement made any progress at a structural level, in terms of legislation? Are women still at risk of imprisonment or worse if they do not adhere to the prescribed hijab rules?

Yes, and I wouldn't distinguish between what is written on paper and what is enforced in reality. Discrimination against women is embedded in Iranian law. One manifestation of this is the mandatory hijab and its violent enforcement in public spaces. When women resist, they do so in the most visible manner possible – through their bodies – and they pay a high price for this. Unfortunately, Amini was not the last woman to face violence in relation to the hijab. There have been other cases like Amini's where women have been arrested and violently beaten, including violence that has resulted in other deaths.

The new 'hijab and chastity' bill is not yet a law, but many of its measures are already being implemented. Women who violate the country's mandatory dress code face intensified pressure, fines and arrests. Shopkeepers, taxi drivers, businesses and employers also face fines should they serve women who do not observe the hijab rule. Cars transporting women without hijabs are regularly impounded for hijab infractions.

Does this mean that the Woman Life Freedom movement has inadvertently led to even harsher measures, meaning a step backwards?

This is what women, especially in Iran, always have to fear — that their actions will provoke harsher reactions. It's the backlash we see in so many places around the world whenever women demand more rights.

Despite the pressure, women continue to push the boundaries by insisting on their demands and resisting growing pressure. Before the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, the discussion around the hijab among government officials was about improper or 'bad' hijabs. Now that so many women are appearing in public dressed as they wish, and without their hijab, the political and social discourse has also changed to reflect this shift.

Speaking of politics, what can we expect from the new government under President Masoud Pezeshkian regarding women's rights?

One of the achievements of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement has been to bring women's demands, as well as the demands of ethnic minority groups, to the fore of Iranian society. Women's rights are typically brought up in every Iranian election campaign, but in a superficial manner. This time was no different. Despite the emphasis

on women's rights, it remains unclear what Pezeshkian will do in office. The only thing that is clear at this point is that he wants to bring economic relief to Iranians by engaging in negotiations with the aim of lifting sanctions. Economic improvements will have a positive impact on the lives of women, but alone they will not guarantee the elimination of discrimination. This issue may prove an opportunity for governments and the UN to amplify and stress the long-standing demands of Iranian women aimed at ensuring equality.

But surely, this current outcome is better than if the hardliner Saeed Jalili had won the run-off?

Turnout in the first round of elections was extremely low, sending a strong message to Iranian officials about the dissatisfaction of Iranians with the status quo. Participation in the run-off elections was higher, though still extremely low. Many people I know who voted for Pezeshkian in the run-off did so to prevent hardliner Jalili from winning, fearing that his victory would have had even stronger adverse effects on their daily lives. For decades now, Iranian women have been trying to prevent a backsliding of their rights, to maintain the gains made so far and to push for increased rights. The decision to participate in these elections can be viewed and analysed along these lines.

If Pezeshkian were to truly act in support of women, he would have to address the long-standing and systemic discrimination against women that goes far beyond the mandatory hijab and encroaches on every aspect of women's lives. Iranian women, through their own perseverance and efforts, have made serious social gains, despite facing this discrimination. But it is clear that they will no longer accept the status quo.

What does all of this tell us about Iranian society in all its facets — in urban versus rural areas, different classes, as well as ethnic and religious minorities?

It shows us that Iranian society, its societal norms and culture, are far ahead of its current laws. This disparity was evident during the protests, which also occurred in smaller towns and rural areas, despite these places being more conservative, traditional and religious. Ideally, laws should lead societal attitudes, especially on issues of women's rights and discrimination, but in Iran, the opposite is true.

What impact does this have on civil society, which saw thousands take to the streets in the months following Amini's death?

That is part of the problem. We have an extremely vibrant,

progressive civil society — activists and ordinary people alike, including a very active women's rights movement. However, all of this exists within an extremely closed society. There are no spaces for organisation and development; everything operates in secrecy in small, decentralised circles. While this has allowed the Woman Life Freedom movement to hold widespread gatherings that are difficult for the state apparatus to control, it also prevents a sustained movement and the establishment of infrastructure and organisational elements. There are no free, safe spaces for this kind of social and political work.

Amini was a Kurdish Iranian woman, and in Iran, ethnic and religious minorities often face even harsher violence. Has this intensified in the last two years?

Yes. As you know, the Kurdish and Baluchi areas had the most sustained and widespread protests following the death in custody of Amini. As a result, Kurds and Baluchis suffered the most during the protests. Around 50 per cent of those killed during the protests were from one of these two communities. The number of arrests in these communities has also been high. These communities continue to face various forms of state discrimination and immense pressure. Even now, on the eve of the second anniversary, there are reprisals against those who dare to raise their voices, to organise, to try to keep the memory of the protests alive or to hold commemorative events. This particularly affects the Kurdish and Baluchi communities.

In the past two years, we have also seen a massive increase in the number of executions of Kurds and Baluchis. Now, with Sharifeh Mohammadi and Pakhshan Azizi, we have two ethnic minority women activists who have been sentenced to death. These are constant signals being sent to these communities to discourage further protest and dissent. This is all the more significant since the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, in its essence, emerged from the Kurdish women's rights movement.

What role can the Iranian diaspora play in this?

The diaspora can play an important role, but we've seen many failed attempts — coalitions that fell apart quickly. It underscores that ultimately change must happen within Iran itself. The international community, including Iranians living in exile, can and should support those inside the country, but we cannot forget that the main actors and change-makers are based inside the country.

And what should the international community do?

The international community needs to be consistent with respect to human rights, demanding that all governments respect the human rights of their citizens and holding all violators equally accountable. Without this consistency, it risks its credibility when it comes to human rights. The international community, and the UN in particular, should put pressure on Iran to halt executions, especially those of Mohammadi and Azizi. It should use negotiation opportunities to raise these cases and the high rate of executions, and push for the release of human rights defenders currently serving prison sentences, especially those in prison following the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. Governments can also offer safe haven to those forced to flee Iran as a result of their human rights work.

This interview was conducted by Hanna Voss.



Sussan Tahmasebi

Sussan Tahmasebi is a leading women's rights advocate and expert from Iran and the Executive Director of FEMENA, an organisation that promotes gender equality and supports women human rights defenders, their organisations and feminist movements in the Middle East and North Africa.