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MIDDLE EASTERN WOMEN ON THE MOVE

**Openings for and the Constraints on Women's
Political Participation in the Middle East**

ZANAN: TRIALS AND SUCCESSES OF A FEMINIST MAGAZINE IN IRAN

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I would like to share with you some of my experiences with the contemporary women's press in Iran. This experience is, of course, personal, first because it is mine and second because I narrate it. However, if this were a purely personal experience, I would not have presented it to you here. I think my experience can, in a representative or symbolic way, be reflective of the experiences of a generation of Iranian women who have gone through a religious revolution, witnessed an all-encompassing and destructive war, and struggled for their rights. In this process, they have come to know themselves better than before. They have shed their more sensitive skin and developed a tougher one. It is true that my experience has occurred within the context of the publication of a women's magazine called *Zanan*, but I assure you that it is not merely a "press" experience. We were born with *Zanan*, and when we learned to write in it we found our voice. Now we have reached an age when we can look back and say that we went through the life of a nation with this publication. My talk is divided into three main parts. In the first part, I will give a short background of the magazine *Zanan*. In the second part, I will talk about the content of the journal. In the third part, I discuss its achievements.

THE SHAPING OF ZANAN

Zanan was the first independent journal after the Iranian Revolution that specifically dealt with women's issues. It went into production in February 1992 with Shahla Sherkat as the publisher and managing director. Before publishing *Zanan*, Sherkat was the managing director of the governmental weekly *Zan-e Rouz* or "Today's Woman." This weekly was aimed specifically at a female readership and continued under the guidance of Kayhan publishing house. The post-revolutionary ideal women that *Zan-e Rouz* offered its readership was a Muslim woman, wearing a chador and

carrying a gun. It addressed a particular type of religious woman, had no interest in attracting the readership of culturally and socially influential and educated women, religious or non-religious, and did not elicit written material from them. Only women who were accepted by the regime were given a platform in the magazine, which explains why this publication is still around. The journal is controlled by the conservatives.

Sherkat's eight-year presence in Kayhan publishing house as a managing director ended with an important political event in June 1991. The post-war factional conflicts that were beginning to intensify in this period led to the wholesale purge of many people from Kayhan who were considered to be the opponents of the conservative faction. Sherkat was the only woman from the editorial group who was pushed out. The rest, all men, who later turned into public figures collectively known as "religious intellectuals," all began to develop non-governmental and independent publications of their own.

Sherkat had already a license to publish the monthly *Zanan* before she was pushed out of *Zan-e Rouz*. In her own words, she was clearly already unhappy with the cliché and formulated representation of women in *Zan-e Rouz*. Yet, she did not see herself as financially capable of producing an independent journal. The men who were pushed out of Kayhan, however, were in a better position. Mostafa Rokh-sefat, Reza Tehrani, and Mashalla Shamsolvaeazzin together began to publish *Kiyan*, the monthly magazine, in November 1991, focusing on the ideas of religious intellectuals in general, and Abdolkarim Soroush in particular. And after a short while they suggested to Sherkat to start an independent journal. This offer was more out of political calculations than concern with women's issues per se. Male religious intellectuals really did not believe that there was such a thing as the "women's question" in Iran. They believed that if their general project of rationalizing and modernizing religion was successful, the problems of women, along with many other social problems, would be solved. However since political and intellectual conflicts were heating up, the starting of new publications in sympathy with the reformist ideas of religious intellectuals was considered important both politically and culturally.

Sherkat, however, had another concern. She, who was the only woman in the religious intellectual circles, believed that women's issues were specific and should be dealt with as such, and was gradually able to

involve the male religious intellectuals with women's issues. In this way, the first issue of *Zanan* was produced in February 1992, in a small room adjacent to the very male-centered *Kiyan* monthly, with very little money. I began working with *Zanan* by its third issue.

ZANAN'S CONTEXT

Zanan's objectives were the enhancement of women's position in society in legal, social cultural, and political arenas. We can divide the content of *Zanan* into three categories: 1) religious discussions; 2) feminist discussions; and 3) social discussions. I will deal with each separately. Religious discussions: *Zanan* believes that women's social and individual lives are deeply influenced by religion. Religious teachings and duties show themselves in different aspects of women's lives. This is why undertaking Iranian women's issues without knowledge of religious doctrines, beliefs, and commands would not be possible. Any changes in the women's situation are also not possible without a rereading and reinterpretation of these same doctrines and beliefs.

Sherkat, who herself has many religious concerns, referred to the importance of religion in her first editorial. In the first issue of *Zanan* she wrote that in putting forth women's issues and religious discussions, *Zanan* must deal with juridical discussions since Iranian civil law has become mixed with the analysis of Islamic jurisprudence. Among inequalities are laws related to divorce, guardianship of children, the amount of criminal culpability, women's ability to act as witness in the court of law, punishment, blood money, and women's role in the family. *Zanan's* question was how to analyze Islamic jurisprudence in relation to family law, social and political participation of women, and punishment. It insisted on the need for the review of religious commands regarding women, so that the path for changes in laws relating to women opened as well.

A young cleric by the name of Moshen Saidzadeh who was very familiar with various religious debates and sources wrote *Zanan's* juridical material. The importance of this material, in addition to analytical content, was the clarity and simplicity with which the material was presented. By referring to a variety of sources and by relying on the variety of jurist opinions in various eras, Saidzadeh showed with certainty that there

is no unanimity regarding women-related religious commands, and secondly that these commands must change over time on the basis of the needs of the time.

The discussion of women-related jurisdiction in a simple language extended the debate to a larger audience. It allowed experts and writers active on women's issues to begin critiquing the existing legal inequalities in a more open way. This critique of existing laws was presented along with juridical discussions and was mostly written by Mehrangiz Kar, the capable female lawyer and writer. Saidzadeh and Kar, one a male religious scholar and one a feminist intellectual – side by side – pursued discussions regarding women's related jurisprudence and law.

As the discussions expanded, fundamentalists became more sensitive. First they complained that these discussions belong only to Islamic jurists, and even more restrictively only to certain Islamic jurists. Slowly, pressures increased. On the one hand, Sherkat was being called to court to explain an article that had appeared in *Zanan*, or to explain her cooperation with a particular writer. On the other hand, a number of writers for the magazine had to endure all sorts of personal and social pressures, ranging from being pushed out of their jobs to inflammatory articles about them in conservative-controlled newspapers and journals.

Nevertheless, *Zanan's* persistence paid off. The result of this period was the popularity of juridical and legal discussions about women in other publications of religious and non-religious intellectuals, involvement of elites with various aspects of women's issues, and even some reform in laws related to women. In fact, although the conservatives heavily criticized the discussions, some changes were introduced in the Fourth and Fifth parliament controlled by the conservatives. Of course, it is still important to note that because of the dominance of the fundamentalist point of view in legislation, which insists on equality in laws and opportunities, fundamental changes have yet to occur.

Reflections and experiences slowly led the people who were running *Zanan* to an awareness that women's problems cannot be solely solved through legal and juridical avenues. Jurisprudence is based on anthropological, sociological, and psychological presuppositions, without the analysis and critique of which it cannot fully be understood. This is why a decision was made to extend the discussion to the realm of philosophy and theology. The first step was to pose a series of important questions to

religious intellectuals. The main focus was to assess whether these men, who were attempting to look at religion from a new perspective, were ready to do the same for the women's question. Do they even acknowledge that there is such a thing as the women's question? Do they offer a specific path for solving women-related problems or do they find the resolution of these problems to be dependent on the resolution of broader and more important problems?

To answer these questions, *Zanan* interviewed a number of well-known religious intellectuals, including Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari. Many of them had never expressed an opinion on women's issues. The overall result was positive. It seemed that although religious intellectuals had yet to offer a clear analysis of the women question in Iran, they were beginning to accept that there is indeed a women problem and they were at least willing to get involved in thinking about the issue.

Another positive result was that the forum created a critique of the ideas presented both by religious and secular women, inside and outside of Iran. Interestingly, some secular men reacted by defending the specificity of the women's question in Iran, critiquing the maleness of the religious intellectual tradition and discourse in Iran.

FEMINIST DISCUSSION

Along with critical religious discussions, which generally were intended to offer a particular reinterpretation of religion, *Zanan* attempted to offer its readers theoretical discussion, particularly a reinterpretation of religion. *Zanan* attempted to offer its readers particularly feminist discussions. Feminism in Iran has always been equated with "Westoxication," social permissiveness, violence against women by men, and homosexuality. In general the perception of feminism and feminists was negative and few were willing to carry the title. The act of accepting feminism is a scientific, social, and philosophical phenomenon that must be seriously studied by intellectuals and elites. Accepting that the experience of others can be helpful to Iranian women, *Zanan* began to introduce to its readers the history of feminism, its various branches, and its important leaders. One can imagine how sensitive such topics could be for a religious publication. Of course, *Zanan* was taken to court because of these discussions.

SOCIAL DISCUSSIONS

Along with religious and feminist discussions, a large part of *Zanan's* effort has been spent on discussions and reports about the Iranian women's contemporary social reality. *Zanan* has brought together many male and female experts to talk about what they consider to be most important issues for women in Iran. They have been asked to talk about the extent to which they think these problems are specific to Iranian women, or are these problems global? And finally, what are the roots of these problems?

Zanan has published reports on female prisoners, women beggars, runaway girls, and the serial murder of women, family courts, and many other issues. In addition, the magazine publishes articles on male/female relations among the youth, student marriages, and active political participation in general. *Zanan* has also reported on successful women in the private sector – lawyers, publishers, sculptors, painters, filmmakers, and even stock traders. The intent has been to suggest that despite social, cultural, and political obstacles, women have been able to advance.

ACHIEVEMENTS

I feel very strongly that *Zanan*, in its tenth year of publication, has had many important achievements. But here I want to talk about one of its most important successes: its efforts to establish relations with non-religious or secular reformist women. I think it is important to talk about this achievement because my limited knowledge and experience with the delicate women's movement in Iran has taught me that women's efforts to achieve equality given the incredible cultural, social, and political odds, cannot be successful without the cooperation of women of all backgrounds and beliefs.

I find establishing relations with secular women intellectuals to be important because there has always been a wall of distrust between religious and secular intellectuals. This wall of distrust has deep historical roots, and was further thickened by the Islamic revolution. Many educated women were ousted out of the public sphere. Many emigrated, while others stayed at home. Some women who went to study abroad never returned. In short, their voices in the public sphere were seriously lacking.

From the beginning, *Zanan* extended its hands to educated and well-informed women of all backgrounds. But this cooperation was always faced with external and internal tensions. Externally, on the one hand, as mentioned above, the magazine was faced with severe fundamentalist criticism for its cooperation with secular women, accusing the magazine of relating with suspicious, anti-religious characters who were seen as spies for foreigners. Their constant attacks made the threat of closure very real. On the other hand, some secular women, both inside and outside of Iran, were under psychological pressure among their friends with similar ideological tendencies, and were even at times called “mercenaries for the Islamic Republic” because they were writing for *Zanan*.

Aside from external pressures, the most important obstacle for cooperation continues to be the high wall of distrust that exists among these women. *Zanan*'s relationship with some secular women and the reaching of a tentative agreement for challenging their forces in one direction to solve women's common problems has not come about easily. Historical experience, a tense and complicated political atmosphere, a lack of a calm environment for the critique of past activities, and cultural and personal differences continuously threaten this newfound and very delicate relationship. Many times our writers left our offices angry and hurt that their words and sentences were deleted, and many times we have been angry and hurt for being forced to act as censors. Not even our close associates understand our predicament. We have gone our separate ways on any given day. However, the continuation of work has shown that both sides – the managing director and the writers – agree firstly on the basis of good will, and secondly on the need for one other to continue the work.

Many of these relations have turned into warm relations, themselves becoming the source of strength in difficult and crisis-ridden days. The presence of Shahla Sherkat as the managing director of the magazine and the one that must be accountable for all of the magazine's political problems, her bold stance on the need to talk about women's problems, and the sincere cooperation of writers of all backgrounds, have made *Zanan* a tribune for genuine discussion of women's social, legal, and cultural problems.

The wall of distrust that exists between secular and religious women now has only developed a very thin crack. It has certainly not collapsed. *Zanan* believes that the women's movement in Iran, more than anything

else, is in need of cooperation among women of all backgrounds since the atmosphere is still male-dominated and the influential men, even the reformist ones, still do not have a clear understanding of gender divisions in the Iranian society. There is no doubt that the burden continues to be on the shoulders of the culturally and socially influential women of Iran, religious or secular, to make their specific demands heard and accepted.