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Prisoners of conscience

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

When I was in Tehran this past January I met and wrote about an academic who was actively involved in lobbying against gender discrimination and violence towards women. After an exchange of pleasantries and some unsweetened black tea the professor took out a file of papers. She was working on two campaigns directed at amending some of the repressive laws against women in her country -- the first was a campaign calling for the eradication of stoning (which can be signed online at <http://www.meydaan.org/English/petition.aspx?cid=46&pid=9>) and the second was a much larger and more dangerous initiative. It is the 'One Million Signatures' petition and it demands, among other points, the prevention of forced child marriages, the abolition of honour killings and sanctioned violence towards women, and provisions to create safe houses for victims of domestic and sexual violence. The campaign seeks to protect a woman's right to live freely and without the fear of gender discrimination and bring about amendments in the Iranian legal code. The professor did not seem scared about her work in the two women's movements. She saw her work was vital.

Exactly a week ago thirty-three women were arrested for staging a peaceful demonstration outside Tehran's Revolutionary Court. The women activists, who had gathered to protest the trial of prominent Human Rights workers Sousan Tahmasbi, Parvin Ardalan, Nooshin Ahmadi Khorasani, Fariba Davoodi Mohajer and Shahla Entesari arrested in 2006 for furthering the 'One Million Signatures' movement, were fully within their legal right to come together to show solidarity with the five women activists. According to Article 27 of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran citizens are guaranteed the right to assemble peacefully. Don't forget, this is a country whose modern history has been founded on a legacy of radical social gatherings and public engagement. It was the police who were violating the law as they forcibly arrested thirty-three women and carted them off to ward 209, reserved for political detainees, in Evin prison.

As of March 8, International Women's Day, all but three women had been released. How? Because every single day is a battlefield for women and because we've learnt that resistance and political empowerment can be globalised. I like to think of it as the globalisation of struggle. Globalised activism. Is there any other meaningful kind of globalisation? One that is positively confronted and that fosters agency instead of promoting shopping and the joys of capitalist consumerism? Forget the globalisation of Coca Cola and McDonald's -- this is the globalisation we ought to be concerned with, the globalisation of ideas and political action.

On Tuesday I received an email from a former professor of mine regarding the arrest of the Iranian women activists. "Urgent: Get the word out" it said. The movement to save a movement had begun. Once confined inside the prison walls the arrested activists had embarked on a hunger strike and were said to be singing songs. Singing truth to power, as it were. They were singing 'Song of Freedom', often heard sung by prisoners in detention centres. Their families gathered outside the notorious Evin Prison on Monday, the day after their arrest, and called for their immediate release. By Thursday a petition circulating demanding the release of all the women (which can be signed at

<http://www.meydaan.org/English/petition.aspx?cid=52&pid=11>) had collected almost 4,000 signatures from around the globe. The Nobel Women's Initiative, founded by Shireen Ebadi, Wangari Mathai, and Jody Williams along with six other women Nobel laureates, one from each continent, focused their attention to the case and has begun updating the world on the condition of the prisoners. Al Jazeera International had covered the story as had GEO and the BBC. Emails were sent across cyberspace and somewhere, something happened.

People clicked on to the immense power of resistance at our fingertips and the possibility for change materialised. All but three of the women were released early Thursday morning. Upon her release one of the hunger strikers Nasrin Afzali, who was rumoured to have been beaten while in Evin, was asked by the press what the general ward of the prison was like. "Awesome" she replied, "It was a very good experience for us". Afzali then told the reporter that the women were regrouping the following day, Friday, to discuss their next move. There was a next move. The movement had not been quashed.

The remaining three prisoners, Shadi Sadr, Mahbubeh Abbasgholizadeh, and Jila Baniyaghoub, are believed to have been kept in Evin because they took responsibility for drafting the statement that called for the March 4 protest. Shadi Sadr founded Zanan-e-Iran, the first website created to monitor the work of Iranian women activists and is also a journalist and lawyer who has successfully defended a number of persecuted women facing the death penalty. Mahbubeh Abbasgholizadeh is the editor of Zanan journal and a key member of the anti-stoning campaign. This isn't the first time she's been arrested. Jila Baniyaghoub is a journalist who has reported from Iraq and Afghanistan. These are the women at the centre of the storm this International Women's Day. This is what a day dedicated to women should be about.

The women's movement is essentially about struggle. A day dedicated internationally to women must ultimately be about that struggle -- the struggle for women to express themselves freely, to live as they choose, and to have control over their bodies and minds. This is not just about Iran, a country that for all its richness in culture and spirit can still be beleaguered by an inequality in gender politics. What about us? Why have we not put a vigorous fight to end the misogynist legal code that oppresses women and sanctions violence committed against us? Pakistani women must also realise that when it comes to the defiance of cruel and illegitimate laws concerning the rights of womankind, whether at home or abroad, jail is an option, indifference is not.

When will Pakistani women come together to make their own 'One Million Signature' campaign against the Hudood Ordinance? I promise I will be the first (though I'd rather be the millionth) person to sign it.