

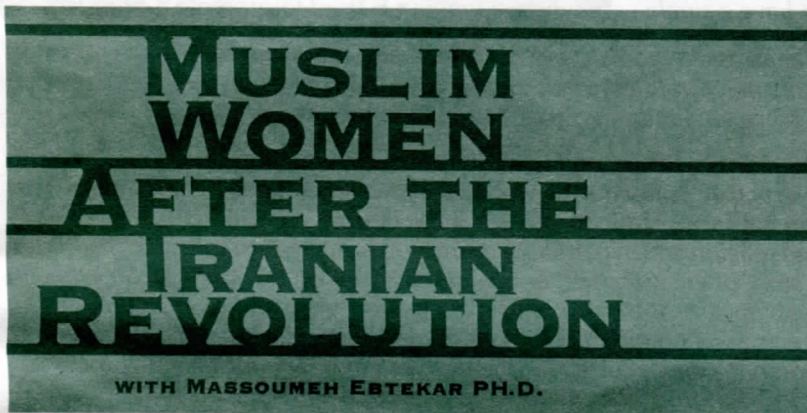
Massoumeh, active in women's issues in Iran, speaks to our interviewer Luz Maria Martinez on women's issues prior to and after the religious revolution in Iran.

Massoumeh with a doctoral degree in immunology is involved in the new emerging field of Cytokine Production Patterns. With this demanding profession, she still finds time to serve as the Coordinator for the Women's NGO Coordinating Office, Fourth World Conference on Women-Beijing '95 and serves as a Board member to the Center for Women Studies in Tehran.

Q: You had been telling me previously that things changed for you when you went to Nairobi in 1985. How did you go from doing immunology research to women's issues?

Massoumeh: Women have the ability to be multidimensional in giving of themselves. This is something that I feel is particular to her womanhood. The experience I have with men is that they do not have the ability to think about something, listen to something else and talk about something else at the same time. Where usually I see women they are doing the dishes, thinking about their project or something, and at the same time are listening to their child or somebody in the house. This is a natural aspect of women's life to be more involved in several functions, they usually carry double or triple responsibilities and that means that more is demanded from them, that they feel more responsible towards issues going on around them. I think that this is one of the main reasons, that being a woman I had to play a role in issues that affect women.

[By the early 1980s] we were faced on one side with a revolution that had changed many ideas and a whole new world has opened up for us, to go and learn and experience other ideas. On the other hand there was a global involvement on behalf of the women which we could not resist.



Q: Explain to me a little how you perceive the women's movement in Iran prior to the revolution and after. From Western media what we get is that women are more oppressed now than before, that women are clamoring for freedom.

Massoumeh: I think that is part of a basic problem. The root lies [in the fact] that we lost dialogue with a major portion of the world after our revolution, due to the fact that media was generally controlled by particular groups who did not welcome the revolution, they embarked on a campaign to distort, to censor the picture of things that were going on inside.

[Under the Shah] Iran was actually very closed politically, opposing groups were severely oppressed, the Shah was an American stooge, and, naturally, news was not coming out on what was happening in the country at that time, but most importantly, the identity of the Iranian nation was in crisis. Who are we? What is our history? During the Shah's regime all they could look at was the West.

I had just entered college and I could see how the young people were confronting this wave of Westernization and they did not like it.

Q: The young were primarily those who were not liking this?

Massoumeh: The young and the informed. There was also unrest in religious and intellectual circles. Intellectual women began choosing national and religious attire rather than Western attire. For example, women wore the chador even though it was legally banned at that time. At the slightest sound coming from the students they would arrest a few and beat a few with these electric prods. I remember these memories very vividly, how the Shah was trying to suppress the movement.

Women who chose the traditional covering at this time were threatened to be expelled from the university and so it became a national resistance. In 1978-79, it became clear that what the people were looking for was a religious alternative, they felt that religious, moral and spiritual values were a betterment to society and their way of life.

By covering our bodily beauty, our sex with Islamic dress the woman can show her intellect, her imagination, her creativity, and cover her sexual attraction and leave that out of the social sphere. In that way society is not engaged in issues that should be related to family members who would not exploit that dimension. And in the society she would be able to interact freely, the ability to display her capabilities to work without having the fear of being exploited sexually. This was a decision that was made by the women themselves. It may be that the West just did not understand, or it maybe that they had no intention to believe in another form of living.

It was actually democracy that brought religion into power. The Shah tried to separate church and state - politics and religion, but it was the people who chose religion in the mainstream of their life. So that was exactly democracy in the sense of the word.

Islam as a religion does not in principle advocate repression of thought as long as other peoples rights are not infringed upon, but the definition of freedom is different according to Islamic context.

Freedom is a positive value and can only entail positive values. So that is a major difference in perspective. Freedom is given only in the dimension where growth is conceived, where development exists.

The media could not exploit the women anymore as an object for sex, or as an object of promoting the sales of any commodity. We have women working in media as script writers, camerawomen, actresses, women producing shows, directing movies, but we do not have a single case where a woman is used to promote a product.

[In Iran] films show the love between a man and a woman, but not a man and a woman having sex together. These films do not show women's advancement or human values. We have many films on the role of women outside of the family and inside. Okay, these are limitations, but has anyone tried to understand?

Q: In doing research I have read some feminists who are saying similar things to you, but other feminists who say that the patriarchy of the Islamic structure is hurtful to women, many issues have been cited of how women are exploited within this patriarchal form. How do you see these issues?

Massoumeh: With issue of patriarchy and religion and in particular Islam, you have to go to the basic principles. I go back to the story of creation. The story of creation has serious implications on our outlook on different issues on how we see women as human beings. In the Islamic story of creation, man and woman are created from a single being with no particular emphasis on either sex. Contrary to other religious texts that say that women sinned first, according to the Koran the sin occurred for the both of them. The mistake that they had, they had together, both are asked to repent and they both do repent and both begin a life on earth together.

In essence this shows a major difference in outlook between Islam and other religions. There is only one single version of the Koran throughout the whole world. Interpretations are different, if we refer to the book and make specific references to the book, we would not have any problems.

Women are free to work and earn as a result of their work. There is no such thing as a man dominating the earnings of a woman. Now whether this type of interpretations has occurred later as a result of a particular misogynist view point, that's something else, but according to the text and scriptures a woman keeps what she earns. So we have financial independence, human values which are exactly the same as the man. Her rights to marriage are the same. When we enter the sphere of the family we have equality but we have differences. That was the point which has always been mistaken to result in discrimination. When it's said in the Koran that the woman inherits half of [what] the man [inherits], immediately we have the action that this is discrimination. But we see that when she marries irrespective if she works or not, her husband has to provide her with her daily sustenance. You see, with half of the inheritance that is lost there is somehow compensation with this principle. On the other hand entering marriage does not curtail her freedom, she still has the right to pursue her education and to work.

We have a decree in Islamic jurisprudence, the woman can obtain a salary for working in the home of her husband. That has been recently implemented in the legal framework of the Iranian civil code. That means that when a woman wants to obtain a divorce, she can ask for the years she has worked in her husbands home, she can ask for compensation and she will be accorded.

Q: I don't think many of us know that. That is a very progressive legislation.

Massoumeh: *It is very progressive. Usually divorced women are left with nothing. They don't have youth anymore, they are usually old, they don't have a job, they don't have anything. By religious jurisprudence the woman has the right to ask for divorce, but the principle is that the man is the person who accepts the heaviest responsibility in this contract. He has the heavy burden the women's is a bit more relaxed.*

It's different to the Western concept of marriage it's one person actually accepting the heaviest burden. If the woman works, she has no responsibility to do so. She is doing this for love or sacrifice. That gives it a beautiful esthetics value. Women do this very naturally in Iranian society. So since he has the obligation, according to the basic principle he has the first right to break the contract. But the woman is also given this right, but it is secondary to [the man's] right.

Q: Why then would you say that Muslim feminists are also critical of the issues within the Islamic structure, the family structure, the women's rights structures? For example, the right of the man to beat his wife.

Massoumeh: *That is one specific point in the Koran. It is specific only to where the woman becomes unfaithful to her marriage. Even the interpretations clarify that this is a very specific case and many people believe that this is a psychological threat where women become totally irresponsible. Of course there is abuse. Many men abuse it. On the other hand, we have liberal measures to confront this. We have many cases where men are taken to court in cases of beatings but while I attest to the fact in Islamic societies it is not a common issue.*

Q: You mean in Iran, it's not a common issue?

Massoumeh: *No it is not a common issue in Iranian culture. Again it's how you interpret it. For example, the matter of taking more than one wife, polygamy. That is brought up as somehow contrary to the rights of the first woman. Again this has been taken out of context by the Western media, but not only by the media it is abused and exploited to the interest of the men.*

In the Koran [there are] cases where women need to be taken into the sphere of the family, [for example, due] sometimes to the imbalance of the population. One man should do this not on the basis of his egocentric lust and desire, but he should bring her into the spirit of the family, to help her and her children to overcome the disaster, and financial problems that she may have.

Q: Can he have children by this woman?

Massoumeh: *Yes he can. But again it's a very specific contract. The Koran states that it is very difficult for a man to practice and maintain justice between two people who he might have preference for in certain circumstances and since you cannot practice justice, you should stick to one.*

It is not the general law where man can run after two, three, four different wives. It has been abused. But just because something has been abused, it does not mean that it is basically wrong or detrimental to the woman.

Q: What are the issues happening or that you see currently affecting Iranian women?

Massoumeh: *The issue affecting the Iranian women is the struggle to engage herself in the decision-making process. The women have to be more effective in projecting their particular views, to be able to prove to the administration that it's to the benefit of the whole country to incorporate women's views and concerns at the national level. It is happening more and more as women are becoming more active, more informed as they are developing their strategies at the level of the NGO's, at the level of national machineries. We have two national machineries established in the last three years.*

There is one national machinery at the level of the President's Office, the Bureau on Women's Affairs. She is there as an advisor to the President. There is another machinery, the Socio-Cultural Committee of Women, a senior level committee to plan at the highest level educational and cultural programs related to women. There is also a women's commission related to the Interior Department which is very active in bringing women active in the provinces and rural level into decision making processes, getting their views.

The picture is not as bad as it is being depicted on the outside. There are a lot of things to be done in the basic principles, a lot to be established. We believe principally that a divine religion cannot be androcentric or misogynistic in the true sense of the word. It cannot be because it is something coming from God. God does not see any difference in his creatures, except in the level of sincerity and purity.▲

Massoumeh is married to a man who she describes as her main motivator in her work and is the mother of two sons age 7 and 12 who she says will one day make good husbands as she is already begging to raise so they understand the importance of women's rights.