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**About ICAN:** Formed in 2006, the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) aims to strengthen women's participation and influence in conflict prevention, social justice, coexistence, and peacebuilding efforts, in situations of closed political space and conflict affected states. ICAN's MENA program seeks to elevate the voices and impact of women's civil society groups on issues of rights, security and peace in countries undergoing transitions, affected by rising militarism and extremism targeting women.

# What the Women Say:

## Killing them Softly: The Stark Impact of Sanctions on the Lives of Ordinary Iranians

Brief 3: July 2012

*"This particular form of sanctioning a nation has been unprecedented in the history of the world."*

Mehrdad Emadi, Economist

The unprecedented, devastating and counterproductive impact of sanctions, coupled with the on-and-off threat of war, is an ever-growing reality in the lives of ordinary Iranians. For the generation of Iranians whose childhood was punctured by nightly bombings, fear of chemical attacks, and eight years of death and destruction resulting from the Iran-Iraq war, the current state of uncertainty, prospects of hardship and unraveling of the lives they rebuilt is overwhelming.

In New York, London, Washington and Brussels the rationale for sanctions vary. Central to the case is the notion that only crippling sanctions can slow Iran's nuclear program and bring about change. A number of the sanctions also target state institutions and individuals implicated in human rights violations. Regardless of their political leanings, among western leaders, policymakers and pundits, no one denies that economic sanctions are blunt instruments that typically harm the civilian population far more than the state. Western policy makers, however, respond that 'this is the price that has to be paid'--the questions of price for what, how much, how long and by whom are left hanging.

Iranians have the answers. The earliest sanctions imposed in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution (and American hostage taking) had less direct impact on the public. But since 1995, when the Clinton Administration honed

*"The sanctions are not new. They started 32 years ago. I don't know of any people who have suffered these kinds of sanctions over such a long period, except Palestinians and Cubans. They toppled our democratically elected government in 1953. After the Revolution, they helped prolong the war with Iraq, and as such helped push the Iranian government to the right. I don't know what the West has gained from all this. I only ask why do they hate us so much?"*

*Iranian Women's Rights Activist, Tehran, July 2012*

*"The international community's sole focus on the nuclear issue has resulted in the adoption of policies that inflict great damage on the Iranian people, civil society and women. Militarization of the environment will prompt repressive state policies and the possibility of promoting reform in Iran will diminish."*

*Women's rights activist, Tehran, April 2012*

in on the oil and gas sector to the current day where the banking and financial sectors have been targeted, private enterprise and ordinary citizens are the primary and overwhelming victims. Needless to say, they are skeptical of western politicians or institutions that claim to care about the well being, human rights or aspirations of the Iranian populace.

It is not uncommon for Iranians in every walk of life to recall the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), when the Western world was complicit with Saddam's Iraq and its use of chemical weapons<sup>2</sup>. With the impact of current sanctions seeping into every day life now, many Iranians consider them to be a profoundly insidious and destructive force and source of basic human rights violations, affecting a wide cross section of Iranians.

1- The Serious Economic Consequences of Sanctions Against Iran's Central Bank, Radio Farda, January 2012 [http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4\\_central\\_bank\\_consequences\\_iran\\_us/24440922.html](http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4_central_bank_consequences_iran_us/24440922.html)  
2- Western governments turned a blind eye to Saddam's production and use of chemical weapons. This has been documented and reported on widely including by Borger, J. "Rumsfeld Offered Help to Saddam", The Guardian, 31 Dec 2002. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/dec/31/iraq.politics> and Frankel, G. "How Saddam Built his War Machine - With Western Help", Washington Post Foreign Service, Sept 17 1990. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/iraq/stories/wartech091790.htm>

As one women's rights activist stated, "the international community's sole focus on the nuclear issue has resulted in the adoption of policies that inflict great damage on the Iranian people, civil society and women. Militarization of the environment will prompt repressive state policies and the possibility of promoting reform in Iran will diminish."<sup>3</sup>

Iranians' wariness of the international community, however, has not quelled criticism of their own government. They have neither an appetite for war nor for the bellicose language of the state. They criticize the government's mishandling of the economy in recent years. They balk at the continued imposition of social restrictions. Those involved in civil rights activism including students, workers, women and leaders from ethnic groups and religious minority communities are among the first to feel the endless pressures and limitations imposed on them. Not least because the sanctions and threat of war allow the state to invoke "a state of emergency" and in so doing suppress critics and voices of dissent.

In its ongoing series of MENA region 'What the Women Say' briefs, ICAN provides a gendered analysis of the impact of sanctions, echoing the voices and experiences of Iranians, particularly women's rights activists, regarding the social, economic, political and security consequences. At a time when the United States, the European Union and others are heralding their national action plans on women, peace and security that highlight the need for women's protection in times of crisis and their participation in conflict prevention and peacemaking, this brief offers the international community recommendations on limiting the immediate and long-term damage being wrought on women, Iranian society and ultimately regional security.

### 1. Current sanctions cut deep and wide into the social and economic life of ordinary Iranians

Iranians know war and they know sanctions. The experiences of women, men, the elderly and the young who lived through the eight years of the Iran-Iraq war are rarely recounted today, but the long term impact is still evident. Though their plight is rarely discussed, women of child bearing age and soldiers exposed to chemical warfare still suffer from complex health problems. Similarly the thousands of men handicapped by landmines and war wounds are rarely a topic of conversation. Another long term impact has been the rise of female headed households in part due to war deaths among men.

Throughout the 1980s war years, Iranians also suffered from sanctions and lived under a strict rations policy. But it was a very different society then. Some 50 percent of Iranians lived in rural areas and were largely self sufficient through domestic agricultural production. The sanctions too were limited to key sectors pertaining to military equipment. As a result the public impact was less evident. International trade relations were sustained including with the US private sector. Today only 29 percent of Iranians live in rural areas. Continued migration to urban areas has led to the expansion of cities and their peripheries. The majority of migrants eke out their living in the service industry and informal economy on the margins of cities. The sanctions regime is doing most damage to the those who are already vulnerable - the urban poor. As the pressures increase, economic class and social divisions are also being exacerbated.

✳ **2010 sanctions choking insurance and shipping sectors with implications for public health:** Sanctions introduced in the summer of 2010 directly targeted insurance companies that insured Iranian shipping involved in the import and export of products. Despite denials by proponents of the sanctions regime, this round of sanctions directly affected the availability of foreign-made medication and other healthcare products to Iranians including vitamins for children and pregnant women and sanitary products. The implication for serious illnesses including cancer is particularly profound. As one women's rights activists recounted, "foreign made medicine became difficult to find in 2010, and with the intensification of sanctions this trend has continued. Domestically produced drugs, which are dependent on imported ingredients, are also more expensive and difficult to find."<sup>4</sup> Others echo this experience. "Many Iranians can no longer afford the high cost of cancer treatment drugs that have become hard to find," says the daughter of a female cancer patient. "Family members have to go from one hospital to another and to multiple pharmacies to find and then purchase the medicines at high costs for the treatment and life of their family members. Patients with poorer prognoses or those who cannot afford it are forgoing treatments and opting for an early death so they don't burden their families financially."<sup>5</sup>

"These days because of my mother's illness I go back and forth to the hospital. Cancer is a painful and protracted saga. On the one hand you have the pain and suffering of those who are afflicted, and on the other hand you have the outrageous [and continuously increasing] costs of treatment. Then there is the worried and tattered faces of those who are ill... and the fear that increasingly stricter sanctions will prevent much needed drugs from reaching them for life saving treatment... Staying alive - we don't want more than this."

*Iranian woman writing on sanctions on Facebook*

3- Interview with Iranian women's rights activist, Tehran, April 2012.

4- Interview with an Iranian women's rights activist, Tehran, April 2012.

5- Iranian activist responding to a call on facebook for stories on the impact of sanctions on the lives of ordinary citizens.

Sanctions targeting Iran's oil and gas sector were also intensified in 2010, through limiting or ending the sale of gasoline products to Iran. In anticipation, the Iranian government initiated a number of steps including ending of subsidies for gasoline, rationing gasoline and increasing domestic refining processes. As a result, the price increase has been significant, with unrationed gasoline costing 4000 Rials per liter in 2009 and projected to increase to 8000 Rials in 2012.<sup>6</sup> Free market prices for gasoline are currently at 7000 Rials per liter. Additionally the quality of the domestic product is much lower than imports, according to experts.

One significant impact of the increased use of domestically produced gasoline has been a noticeable decline in air quality, particularly in Tehran. Reports note that Tehran's air quality, which was already poor, has worsened significantly since gasoline imports were sanctioned. Even the New York Times report explained the connection between the ban on gasoline imports, the push to use domestically produced gasoline and the rapid air quality deterioration:

"According to e-mails circulated to industry experts...Iran's new supply of domestic gasoline may contain high levels of aromatics — more than twice the level permitted by Iranian law. Burning aromatics in car engines produces exhaust packed with high concentrations of "floating particles" or "particulates" that, added to the typical smog caused by nitrous oxides and ozone, can cause a range of health problems, from headaches and dizziness to more serious cardiac and respiratory complaints."<sup>7</sup>

In the same year, Mohsen Nariman, MP from Babol said, "air pollution is on the rise at an unusual rate and it seems that one of the main causes is the substandard gasoline that is being used in Tehran."<sup>8</sup> One newspaper, the Hamshahri Daily, reported that 310 persons died per day as a result of poor air quality in Tehran in the months of October and November 2011. The cause of death included increased respiratory complications, heart attacks and stroke.

"Today the fluctuating costs of products in the market between the morning and the afternoon was truly something worth noting. The cost of tires in the morning was 350,000 Tomans (at about \$200-\$250 at the time) by the afternoon the same tires were 750,000 Tomans. I think that we should just lay down and die, and only those idiots who keep saying that sanctions will not impact the economy of Iran should be allowed to live."

*Iranian women's rights activist,  
Iran December 2011, Facebook comment*

✱ **Unprecedented banking sanctions targeting Iranians in all areas of life:** The banking sanctions that went into effect in December 2011 have also wreaked havoc in people's lives. The Iranian Rial has almost halved in value against the US dollar and other currencies. With memories of the Iran-Iraq war still fresh for many Iranians, across Tehran and other cities, people, including shopkeepers and merchants reacted by hoarding products. Consequently the price of a wide range of goods and products including foodstuffs rose between 20-100 percent, and continues to fluctuate.

The knock-on effect is evident in all areas of life. While incomes have not increased, rents have doubled in some areas of the city. The price of bread – a staple of the Iranian diet especially for the poor – has increased by some 1500% in the past 2 years,<sup>9</sup> in part due to the removal of state subsidies. The uncertainty is causing stagnation for the private sector, while some businessmen point out that companies affiliated with the state are exploiting the situation as they have access to government exchange rates.<sup>10</sup> Sanctions were imposed to prevent a nuclear weapons program. Instead, as one commentator notes, the price of manure has risen.

Iranian students studying abroad have also been impacted seriously. Many are being forced to give up their education as their families can no longer afford the tuition. Some UK universities are refusing to register Iranian students because they cannot prove that they can transfer the necessary fees. But the sanctions – or the way that banks and other bodies currently interpret them - make it impossible for most Iranian students to do so.<sup>11</sup>

In addition countless Iranians who have relatives living in the EU and US and those who travel for medical treatment have become entangled in the vast banking sanctions net.<sup>12</sup> Thousands have personal bank accounts and savings in western banks, some dating back decades. Now they are being forced to shut down their accounts and find themselves caught in a financial no-man's land; being forced to close existing accounts, while barred from transferring their

6- <http://kartesookht.blogfa.com>

7- Yong, W. "Energy Policy in Iran Leave Many Gasping," The New York Times, 21 December 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/22/world/middleeast/22tehran.html>

8- "Causes of Tehran's Air Pollution," Tabnak News, December 2010. <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/134825>

9- Quoting Dr. Hossein Askari, <http://www.insideiran.org/featured/qa-iranians-not-regime-suffer-from-sanctions/>

10- Information based on news reports including <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/oil-sanctions-set-off-iran-currency-crisis/story-fn-b64oi6-1226427514115>, and <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/06/dispatch-nuclear-talks-a-pocketbook-issue-for-iranians.html#ixzz20ncGdK53>

11- Based on responses to a call on facebook to share stories about the impact of sanctions on the lives of ordinary Iranians.

12- Based on interviews with Iranians inside and outside the country.

savings to other accounts internationally or in Iran.

In effect the banking sanctions are forcing massive reliance on a cash based economy, making already vulnerable Iranians dependent on black marketeers for the transfer of funds to cover educational, health or other legitimate costs. It is also fostering the rise of informal power structures and contributing to the lack of accountability and transparency. Even the Iranian Vice President has acknowledged this development, stating, “in the framework of these sanctions we [the Iranian government] have to begin negotiations with goods traffickers near the borders and use them to buy products which are included in the sanctions.”<sup>13</sup>

Not surprisingly many Iranians are left questioning if the banking sanctions are intent on forcing Iran’s rulers to come to the negotiating table or if Iranian society and the country’s infrastructure at large are being deliberately targeted and weakened. The timing of the intensification of sanctions is particularly questionable. Iranian observers, notably civil and political activists are asking whether sanctions are in fact intent on balancing power in the region in favor of regimes that “despite their authoritarian nature accommodate the west and its security agenda in the Middle East, at a time when revolutions may threaten the existing security dynamics in the region.”<sup>14</sup>

In an interview with Radio Farda<sup>15</sup>, Mehrdad Emadi, Economic Consultant to the EU, stressed the destructive nature of these sanctions, noting:

*“This particular form of sanctioning a nation has been unprecedented in the history of the world. The only similar type of sanctions, were implemented for a short period of time, and were intended to prevent the illegal transfer of funds by Qaddafi within the framework of the activities of Libya’s Central Bank. But even during that time, [the sanctions] weren’t implemented in this fashion [as we see against Iran’s Central Bank], ... not all the transactions of the Libyan Central Bank were sanctioned and the sanctions focused only on the illegal transfer of funds and money laundering...[The Iranian sanctions] are not related to a specific sector or industry nor to business entities or specific individuals. In this framework, all monetary transactions, currency transactions and business credit accounts for imports as well as exports and for the coverage and payment of insurance, which in every country falls under the responsibilities of the Central Bank of that country, will be made illegal in Iran. Iran’s Central Bank will no longer be able to carry-out these duties, because it has now been identified as a center for money laundering. In this framework, international corporations, governmental organizations, non-governmental bodies or security organizations will no longer be able to transfer funds or open credit lines for trade, using the Central Bank.”*

In the same interview, Hossein Mansour, a UK-based economist offered a bleaker analysis, noting, “the negative impact on Iran’s economy, especially in the long run, will only be addressed with the expenditure of billions of dollars and after several generations, and will be devastating for the infrastructure of the Iranian economy.”

## **2. Women are bearing the brunt of the economic and social impact of sanctions**

Women are especially affected by the economic fall out of the sanctions. They are being pushed out of the job market and bearing the brunt of increased unemployment. Women’s rights experts recognize socio-economic pattern emerging similar to those in Iraq when sanctions were imposed. In Iraq sanctions and the ensuing poverty resulted in the withdrawal of girls from education and increases in child marriage (families were forced to marry off their young daughters to reduce the number of mouths to feed). Iranian girls are at risk of similar developments.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, women’s rights experts believe that the externally imposed sanctions will allow conservatives to further their regressive social agenda by relegating women back to the domestic sphere, limiting their access to education and the job market and couching it as an attempt to increase male employment.<sup>17</sup>

Despite significant societal changes, Iran remains a male dominated culture, reinforced by the government’s conservative ideology that considers men as the heads of households and primary breadwinners. Programs in line with this ideology, seeking to relegate women to the home as wives and mothers only have been stepped up in recent years.

13- Commented on by Mehrdad Emadi in “The Serious Economic Consequences of Sanctions Against Iran’s Central Bank”, Radio Farda, January 2012. [http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4\\_central\\_bank\\_consequences\\_iran\\_us/24440922.html](http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4_central_bank_consequences_iran_us/24440922.html)

14- Interview with an Iranian political activist, May 2012.

15- “The Serious Economic Consequences of Sanctions Against Iran’s Central Bank”, Radio Farda, January 2012. [http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4\\_central\\_bank\\_consequences\\_iran\\_us/24440922.html](http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4_central_bank_consequences_iran_us/24440922.html)

16- See the case of Iraq, where women were forced out of the social sphere and employment and into the homes, as a result of sanctions, highlighted by Al-Ali, Nadjie Sediq, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories From 1948 to Present*, Zed Books: London, 2007.

17-Bahdi, R. “Iraq, Sanctions and Security: A Critique” *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy*, Volume 9:237, 2002. <http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1067&context=djglp>

✳ **Indirect and immeasurable consequences of sanctions-- stifling women's education, a key engine of socio-political change:** Women's rights activists are also wary of the indirect impact of sanctions – and the manipulation of the economic hardships by conservatives - on women's access to higher education. Educated women from middle and traditional working classes across rural and urban areas, among the rich and the poor, have been the primary engine of socio-political change in Iran. The demand for equal rights and equal socio-political, economic and cultural rights permeates every level of society. From the outset of the Islamic republic, the status of women has been a critical and contentious issue. In 2003, conservatives proposed the imposition of quotas to limit women's access to higher education and the measures were briefly implemented across some medical fields in the 2004 national university entrance exams. Massive outcry among students and women's rights activists forced the withdrawal of the quotas.<sup>18</sup>

Conservatives have not backed down however. They continue to argue that when women are more educated than men, traditional family values are undermined, as women prefer to marry at an older age, seek similarly educated (or more educated spouses) and have higher expectations. These traditionalists also posit that women in the work force take away men's jobs. Concerns about the impact of women being more educated than men have prompted some conservative lawmakers to reinstate quotas limiting women's participation in higher education. Women and student's rights activists believe that during President Ahmadinejad's second term the quotas have been introduced with greater zeal and less accountability. They coincide with the intensification of sanctions and increased economic hardships. As the economic situation worsens, women's access to higher education, will likely endure further limitations. Even school age girls are at risk as economic pressures may force families to make choices and opt for boys' schooling. This may lead to diminished literacy rates among girls in the near future.

In effect, the marginalization of women from education and employment enables extreme conservatives to kill many birds with one stone. They prevent a high rate of women's entry into the public space (via universities). They eliminate women from the economy and job market, particularly, higher earning and more influential positions. They sustain and revive the power imbalance between women and men, as women will have fewer choices in life, limited control of resources and become (and remain) more economically dependent on men at greater rates than already exist. Ultimately they may quash the force of women's demands - the next generation's voices - for progressive change in society at large. As one conservative member of parliament and staunch supporter of limiting women's presence in university has put it: "when women can't travel to far away cities without the permission of their husbands, their expertise has no impact on improving the situation of the country!"<sup>19</sup>

There is also a significant reduction in women's share of the national budget. For example, budgets allocated to establish a national insurance program for housewives, have been eliminated, while the military budget has doubled for next year.

✳ **Downturns in domestic production, increases male unemployment and violence against women:** There are also more insidious effects, difficult to quantify but increasingly evident. The sanctions have caused massive downturns in domestic production. The fledgling private sector is unable to import the necessary raw materials for manufacturing. The banking sanctions are causing a virtual standstill in imports and exports by legitimate businesses. Even domestic agriculture will lose its markets.

Meanwhile those with political connections are exploiting the situation often by importing cheaper Chinese products. This downward trend in domestic production will give rise to lower wages, increase unemployment among men and women and ultimately put pressure on families. As evident in other settings, women will bear the brunt of dealing with their unemployed spouses and the men of the family within the home. These new dynamics are likely to lead to increased incidences of domestic violence and family conflicts, as men's inability to live up to social expectations can lead to depression and attacks on women.<sup>20</sup> Reduction in family income inevitably is forcing women to find new sources of income. Their coping strategies will likely include cutting back on their own health, wellbeing and dietary needs to provide for their dependents. As in other countries, for the most vulnerable, poverty will likely lead to risky survival strategies including child labor and sex work- informal sectors which have expanded in Iran in recent years.<sup>21</sup>

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18- Since the 1979 revolution, conservative forces have sought to limit women's access to higher education and certain technical fields. They failed and eventually the trends changed in favor of women. By 1998, 52 percent of university entrants were women. In recent years, they have comprised over 60 percent of Iranian university students. After several years of quotas, women's enrollement in university is experiencing a downward trend.

19- Gender Quotas for all Subjects at all Six Government Universities, Shargh Daily, May 28, 2012. <http://sharghnewspaper.ir/News/91/03/08/32802.html>

20- For this trend as a result of international sanctions in Iraq see: Husein Al Jawaheri, Yasmin Women In Iraq: The Gender Impact of International Sanctions. I.B. Tauris & Co: London, 2008.

21- *ibid*

✱ **The most vulnerable are at the greatest risk: Afghan refugee women and children:** Vulnerable groups, such as Afghan refugees and migrants who have been living in Iran legally and illegally as a result of decades of war and unrest in their own country, are also at greater risk. The situation is most severe for Afghan women and children refugees or Iranian women married to Afghan men and their children who do not have identity cards. The intensification of government crackdowns and forced repatriation programs, against Afghans (including their Iranian wives and children) with illegal status in Iran, has already had a negative impact on the livelihood of these groups, but as the economy has worsened the hostility they face from Iranian society and the government has also increased. Afghans have been targeted with segregation programs in public spaces and are facing increased state and other forms of violence, while their access to income and jobs has also been severely limited. Comprising a large percent of those employed in the informal sector as household help, street peddlers and in the service industry Afghan women and children are at risk of facing worsening working conditions and abuse in their place of employment.

### 3. Independent civil society and civic activism are among the first casualties of current international policies

Many of the men and women who founded and run Iran's civil rights movements including human rights and women's rights activists, workers unions and journalists spent their childhood or young adulthood at war. They have tasted and experienced the impact of war and sanctions on a personal level. They are also fierce advocates of international human rights and humanitarian norms and ideals.

The public outpouring in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 presidential elections prompted the state to impose heavy security measures against civic actors. But debilitating sanctions coupled with the daily rhetoric of war has elevated national security concerns and further diminished the state's tolerance of dissent internally. Activists are regularly accused of working in concert with the west to destroy the Islamic Republic. The uncertainty and fear has also affected the public's receptivity to social activism. It is seen as a secondary issue compared to the urgent realities of poverty and prospect of war.

The sanctions are having a long-term negative impact on the source of societal change in Iran. The urban middle class that has historically played a central role in creating change and promoting progress in Iran are key casualties of the sanctions regime. Many civil society organizations and charities survive on the basis of voluntary activism and support. But facing economic uncertainty, many people are retreating from public voluntary work. Even the most committed have less time, as they are working longer hours and often at multiple jobs to meet their economic needs. Moreover with private enterprise in demise, more people will become dependent on the state and thus unable and fearful of engaging in civil activism. Additionally, sanctions and in particular the limitations placed on transfer of funds, has created serious impediments for charity organizations engaged in health and medical services, education efforts, support for orphans and disadvantaged women and children to carry-out their work. Many of these organizations have ceased their activities.

✱ **Sanctions are isolating Iranians from international forums:** Beyond the economic impact, civil society, including the women's movement in Iran has been further isolated from their international counterparts, as a result of the sanctions. Security challenges imposed by their own government already curtail civil society's ability to attend regional and international conferences, workshops and other events. But the policies of other governments further complicate their lives. Visas that Iranian passport holders need to travel internationally, take considerable amount of time and resources. The new banking sanctions have ended the possibility of financial exchanges, while the falling price of the Rial has increased the financial burden for those activists who want to participate in conferences and training opportunities. Activists, like regular Iranians, cannot use banks to transfer funds for conference participation, hotel reservations, or to attend courses abroad. Finally, for years despite state restrictions, activists have used the internet as a critical tool for communication. But the sanctions policies have led many large hardware and software manufacturers in the United States to deny services and products to Iranians. Thus just when contact with and solidarity from the outside world are most needed, Iranians are faced with the greatest level of isolation.

### 4. What Women Do: resilience, courage, voices of peace and a window to the future

Women's rights activists have never had it easy. They have fought against an assault on their legal and political rights as well as their demand for equal opportunities in the economic, social and cultural life of the country. In 2006, when a group of women initiated the Million Signatures Campaign to demand the reform of laws that discriminate against women, they immediately faced state scrutiny and obstruction. The movement thrived however, transcending age, economic, rural, urban and even political and religious divisions to draw in a mix of volunteers. Using new and old media, improvised street theater and small group education and outreach initiatives they raised public awareness about

the impact of gender based discriminatory laws and called on people to sign up and join their campaign in favor of legal changes. Despite security pressures the movement elevated issues of gender equality to the national level both politically and within wider society.

After the summer of 2009, and the mass post-election protests, women's rights activists faced increased restrictions as the space for dissent became ever more limited. With the rise of sanctions and ratcheting up of the war rhetoric, these activists are under immense pressure to become silent and conform. Countless social and political activists have been imprisoned and or forced into exile. Students – female and male have been expelled from universities because of their civil activism. Under these circumstances, with economic hardships and prospects of yet another devastating war, long-term planning and the development of sustainable programs to maintain the gains already made and push for basic rights are increasingly difficult, if not impossible.

✳ **Women's Demands: no sanctions, no war, talk it out!**

Despite these pressures, the Iranian women's movement has not been silenced. The call against war, in favor of a negotiated settlement, and an end to sanctions has become a primary issue for many, despite the risks they incur. They are using every opportunity to send their message to the world.

Women's rights activists now living outside of Iran draw on international platforms to echo the concerns and voices of their counterparts inside the country. Meanwhile, despite the risks, women in Iran have not been silenced either. One group, the Mothers for Peace, representing different sectors and ideologies began its activities in 2008, with the aim of preventing war and violence in the country and promoting peace regionally. They, along with other women's groups, have issued several statements opposing the possibility of war (see box). Echoing this, in 2011, on the International Day to Fight Violence Against Women (November 25th), another group of Iranian activists issued their anti-war and violence statement, noting:

*"We a group of women's rights activists in Iran, are worried about the increasing violence against women and children [that is the result] of the polarized and hostile atmosphere [and] dead-end national and international politics of tension and violence. As a result of these policies, violence against women and children infiltrates the deepest social and political and familial layers of Iranian society."<sup>22</sup>*

On March 8, 2012, in honor of International Women's Day, several activists involved in the One Million Signatures Campaign recorded video messages opposing war.<sup>23</sup> They reject the official narratives that often pose the problems in the terms of good and evil, just and unjust, and call on all sides – including their own government – to engage in constructive dialogue rather than the rhetoric of war and threats.

## Recommendations to the international community, particularly the US and European countries

✳ **Fundamentally rethink policy on Iran:**

**1. End the sanctions policy against Iran.** Recognize that sanctions as a general rule have a poor record of influencing the behavior of states and in many situations have severely harming the population at large, particularly vulnerable groups and democratic movements.<sup>24</sup> Ninety-nine percent of the current sanctions against Iran are too broad to impact the behavior of the government, instead they target the population.

**2. Sanctions are not a substitute for war, they are a step closer to war.** Failed sanctions will only work to strengthen the position of those advocating for another war in the region. Resolve to address the differences in a mutually respectful manner immediately.

### Mothers for Peace - Excerpt of their Statement

"We are a group of Iranian mothers, representing different ethnicities and religions. We are mothers who have spent our youth fighting the dictatorship of the Shah and imperialism. We are mothers who joined the [1979] revolution in the hopes of achieving a free and prosperous Iran and...ensuring justice. We are mothers who during the 8 year war with Iraq and afterwards paid a great price for achieving the ideals for our country. We are mothers who have endured the harshest economic sanctions, and have waited in long lines in order to secure sustenance for our families. We are mothers who have infused the blood of our children with pride and in the spirit of justice, freedom, independence and peace. We are the mothers of peace and hope. We will work to achieve security, freedom and justice, and in reality human rights, for ourselves and our children. To reach these goals we extend our hands toward all Iranian mothers. In the hopes of victory, not in war but over war."

Mothers for Peace: In the Hopes of Victory Over War, Not In War, Ma Zanan Website; [www.mazanan.com/?p=3512](http://www.mazanan.com/?p=3512)

22- A Statement of Group of Women's Rights Activists Inside Iran, on the Occasion of International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, Focus on Iranian Women, November 27, 2011. <http://ir-women.net/spip.php?article9837>

23- The Screams That You May Hear: Iranian Women's Rights Activists Say No To War, March 8, 2012, <http://www.we-change.org/english/spip.php?article954>

24- See: Blunt Instrument: Sanctions Don't Promote Democratic Change, Natasha Bahrami and Trita Parsi, February 6, 2012, Boston Review [http://www.bostonreview.net/BR37.1/trita\\_parsi\\_natasha\\_bahrami\\_iran\\_sanctions.php](http://www.bostonreview.net/BR37.1/trita_parsi_natasha_bahrami_iran_sanctions.php)

**3. Recognize that sanctions weaken society not the state.** Iranian society is already witnessing the emergence of radical groups. As one women's rights activist notes, in countries of this region, including Iran, growing gaps between the rich and poor do not make governments vulnerable, rather they make the population vulnerable to increased radicalization against the West as a way of coping with humiliation. In border areas, where poverty is severe, we already witness the increasing influence of terrorist groups. If this trend continues we will be faced with a weakened Iranian society – at risk of being radicalized, with detrimental consequences for regional security in the medium and long term.

**4. Recognize that sanctions undermine women's security and empowerment.** The US and EU have been strong proponents of the global women, peace and security agenda with the development of priorities and action plans to ensure women's empowerment. But sanctions undermine and contravene these policies. The contradictory nature of US and EU rhetoric, policies and actions increase the Iranian public's suspicion about them, and credence to charges of hypocrisy.

✳ On negotiations with the Iranian government:

**5. Engage Iran on the full range of issues, including regional security, economic issues, human rights, culture, etc.**

Incentives, especially those that reduce the hardship of ordinary Iranians, should be put forth to encourage a peaceful settlement to the disputes of the international community with Iran.

**6. Call for the inclusion of civil society in engagement with Iran.** Should Iran and the international community reach an agreement that would allow for negotiations and dialogue on a wider set of issues, civil society, including women's groups, human rights groups and peace activists, should participate.

✳ On immediate steps for redressing the impact of sanctions on ordinary citizens:

**7. Do not force an entire nation to adopt non-transparent means of financial transactions.** Revise the banking sanctions so that ordinary people are not caught in them. Specifically, adopt measures to facilitate the transfer of funds by ordinary Iranian citizens and Iranians with dual nationality (EU, US, UK etc) for travel, tuition, and medical care, in the case of sale of property, inheritance or for other personal and familial purposes. Forcing Iranians to move toward a cash economy reduces transparency and fosters the growth of shadowy actors.

**8. Address the adverse healthcare impact of sanctions immediately.** Sanctions including limitations impacting the import of medicines, medical equipment and forced usage of substandard gasoline are affecting people's health and lives. These issues should be investigated and alleviated immediately with cooperation between the US, European and Iranian governments.

**9. Help ease and enable visa applications for Iranians seeking to visit relatives.** Throughout the EU, US, Canada and Australia there are millions of citizens of Iranian descent. They have elderly parents and relatives living in Iran who visit them regularly. Visas for relatives should be expedited and offered for longer periods.

**10. Encourage student visas and conference attendance.** Student visas and visas for conference participation should be processed more quickly and with less financial burden on applicants.

**11. Facilitate free and safe access to the internet to help foster independent civil society.** Sanctions have severely limited Iranian civil society's safe access to the internet including necessary software and hardware. The international community should help provide this access and limit the imposition of sanctions in this sector.

This brief is available on our website at: [www.icanpeacework.org](http://www.icanpeacework.org)

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