



## **Answers to Your Most Frequently Asked Questions About the Campaign**

By Sussan Tahmasebi

### **What is the One Million Signatures Campaign?**

The One Million Signatures Campaign officially launched on August 27, 2006, aims to collect one million signatures in support of a petition addressed to the Iranian Parliament asking for the revision and reform of current laws which discriminate against women. One of the main aims of the Campaign is to educate citizens and particularly women about the negative impact of these discriminatory laws on the lives of women and society as a whole. Those who agree with the aims of the Campaign can support it by signing the petition. Those who are interested in becoming more involved can become involved in local groups working on the Campaign. The Campaign uses a face-to-face education approach in promoting awareness about the laws, and Campaign activists after going through a training course on the laws, and face-to-face approach, can become more involved by collecting signatures from fellow citizens. To date, nearly 1,000 individuals have been trained in this method, but there are countless others who have downloaded the petition from our site or have received it from friends and who are engaged in signature collections. The Campaign is officially active in over 15 provinces. In Tehran, the Campaign is organized in a committee format, where the bulk of the activities of the Campaign are carried out. In the provinces, local volunteers decide the structure of the Campaign and how to carry out its work based on local needs and resources. The document "About the One Million Signatures Campaign" explains more about the Campaign, its goals and its methodology.

### **What laws exactly are you seeking to change?**

The Campaign is asking that all discriminatory laws against women be reformed. The kinds of changes we are requesting in the laws have been outlined and explained in the educational booklet of the Campaign, the "Effect of Laws on Women's Lives." The booklet discusses some of the legal changes that the Campaign seeks, such as equal rights for women in marriage, equal rights to divorce for women, end to polygamy and temporary marriage, increase of age of criminal responsibility to 18 for both girls and boys, right for women to pass on nationality to their children, equal diyah (compensation for bodily injury or death) between women and men, equal inheritance rights, reform of laws that reduce punishment for offenders in cases of honor killings, equal testimony rights for men and women in court, and other laws which discriminate against women.

### **Are the demands of the Campaign in opposition to Islam?**

No. While the Campaign seeks to bring Iranian law addressing women's status in line with international human rights standards, these demands are in no way in contradiction to Islam. Iranian law is based on interpretations of Sharia law, but these interpretations have been up for

debate by religious scholars for some time, not only in Iran but around the Islamic world. Shiite Islam, on which the interpretations of Sharia rely with respect to Iranian law, claims to be dynamic and responsive to the specific needs of people and time. Iranian society has changed much since 1400 years ago, but the interpretations of Sharia on which the Iranian law is based remain rather conservative. We ask that the laws come in line with international human rights standards and recognize the important role that religious scholars can play in facilitating our demand. In fact, long before the start of the Campaign, religious scholars, including ayatollahs Sanei'i and Bojnourdi, for example, using dynamic jurisprudence and ijtihad had addressed some of our demands by offering new and progressive interpretations of Sharia with respect to women's rights. But these interpretations have not been translated into laws governing the rights of women. We hope that our effort will convey the urgency of our demands to lawmakers and hope that religious scholars take a more active role in examining these laws and bringing them inline with the realities of Iranian women and Iranian society. In fact, activists in the Campaign welcome progressive interpretations of Islam with regard to women's rights and some have even held discussions with religious scholars in this respect.

### **Who can sign the petition?**

Only Iranian nationals can sign the petition and only their signatures count toward the one million to be presented to the Parliament. Second generation Iranians living abroad who have one Iranian parent can also sign the petition. International supporters can express their solidarity by issuing statements of support for our effort or signing the petition for international support. To date, many Nobel peace prize winners, the Dalai Lama and other well known international figures have expressed solidarity with our efforts. But the signature of international supporters does not count toward the one million signatures we are aiming to collect.

### **How long will the Campaign last?**

The Campaign will last until the one million signatures are collected. Initially Campaign activists assumed that it would take 2-3 years to collect the signatures, but the process of signature collection has been slower than expected, because changing patriarchal cultures takes time and because activists have faced pressure and limitations from security forces. Nevertheless, the activists are committed to continuing the work of the Campaign and the Campaign continues to grow and progress.

### **How many signatures have you collected?**

On the one year anniversary of the Campaign, activists decided not to announce the number of signatures, because many signed petitions especially from the provinces, had not been submitted to the documentation committee of the Campaign which is charged with tallying the number of signatures. We will announce the number of signatures in the future and once petitions from around the country can be collected.

## **What's the Campaign's Policy on Funding?**

Early on, in the first couple of meetings related to the Campaign and prior to its official launch, the issue of funding was brought up and put to rest. It was decided, and the Campaign stands firm on this issue to this day, that no funding support from international organizations, foundations or governments whether overt or covert would be accepted. It was further agreed that no funding from national organizations and foundations or government institutions, whether overt or covert would be accepted by the Campaign. For those of us starting this effort, and for those who joined subsequently, the issue of independence was the most important issue. We knew that if we were to be successful in reaching the grassroots and the Iranian population and establishing relationships based on trust, there should be no question about our independence. And financial support from institutions, whether national or international, would quickly erode that trust and our standing in establishing an independent movement. At the same time we realized that the success of our effort was based largely on our success in creating a sense of ownership among activists involved in the Campaign and supporters as well. The contribution of funds, however small, from individual members and supporters of the Campaign would go a long way to reinforce this sense of ownership.

From the start however, we faced accusations from security forces, whether official or spread in the form of rumors, or published untruths in news outlets associated with security apparatuses, in regards to receiving support or direction from the West. The saving grace for the Campaign here has been that all its members understand and fully believe that the Campaign is a home grown effort, which relies on the ideas, and energies of Iranians, especially young women and men, for its sustenance, and on the personal contributions of individual members and supporters to meet its financial obligations. And certainly, in this sense the Campaign can set an example for other efforts in Iran and internationally.

Additionally, much of the Campaign's activities have been sustained by contributions of time and non-monetary resources of individual members and supporters. For example, Campaign meetings and events are often held in the homes of members, who cover costs associated with these meetings out of pocket. Those traveling to the provinces to conduct training workshops or connect with members in other cities, pay for travel costs out of pocket, and stay in the homes of friends and family or other Campaign activists. Contributions from supporters are largely used to support the work of the website and the printing of educational pamphlets on the laws, which are distributed to the public as an educational tool. With this level of commitment we have managed to grow and still remain independent. We ask that our volunteers and those people who identify themselves as Campaign members, to adhere to these general ethical guidelines in their cooperation with us. So, if you ever hear someone accusing the Campaign of receiving financial support from international groups, you should seriously question the credibility of the information being provided and if anyone ever approaches an international organization seeking financial support for the Campaign, you should seriously question the credibility of the individual.

## **How does the Iranian public react to your efforts?**

People's reaction to the Campaign is varied. Many support our effort and can demonstrate that support by adding their signature to the petition or becoming more involved. We realize that besides laws and some resistance from those in power, we also face cultural resistance, from a

small segment of society. This is why the Campaign has adopted the face-to-face education approach, so that a true discussion on women's rights can take place among citizens. Change in cultural attitudes, especially patriarchal beliefs deeply imbedded in society takes time and the educational component of the Campaign is one of the most important components of this effort. At the same time Campaign activists contend that women's social status in Iranian society has improved considerably. Women are present in all social spheres. Over 60% of college entrances and larger percentages of college graduates are women. Women are present in local and national government and high decision making levels (though, similar to other countries, especially in the region, this representation continues to lag far behind that of men). Women are educators, university professors, health care providers, business owners, etc. Campaign activists feel that the laws governing the status of women are far behind the realities of women's lives and their social gains in Iran and as such need to be reformed. They believe that in an effort to promote women's equal status, laws should be ahead of cultural norms and currently they are far behind cultural and social realities and as such reform is necessary.

### **Is the Campaign opposed to the government of Iran?**

No. The Campaign is not an opposition group or opposed to the government. It seeks to work within the existing system to create change and to express the demands of a major segment of the Iranian population to the government. The Campaign's petition is directly addressing the Iranian public and the Iranian legislature (Parliament). Some within the government or within political groups have supported and signed the Campaign's petition, especially reformists, including many former parliamentarians, some current reformist parliamentarians, people from ruling-religious families, etc. Some Campaign members have even reached out to parliamentarians and other political figures to introduce the Campaign and speak about its demands. Since the start of the Campaign, there has also been much discussion among decision-makers and religious leaders about the need to reform laws on women. Activists hope that through this effort, the urgency of the matter will be conveyed to the Parliament, forcing them to act with expedience and greater resolve, than they would if left up to their own accord. Since the start of the Campaign, the discourse on women's rights has become common place, among grassroots groups and citizens as well as those in the highest levels of public office and this is a major achievement and source of pride, demonstrating the success of the Campaign and its peaceful and civic strategies.

### **What kind of resistance and pressure have Campaign activists faced from government?**

From the start of the Campaign we have faced resistance from some segments of the Iranian government, particularly security forces. The inaugural seminar of the Campaign, marking its official start was thwarted by security forces who did not allow the seminar to take place. As such, the Campaign started its work on the streets, behind the closed doors of Ra'ad conference hall. Since then, our efforts to secure public seminar space for conferences addressing women's rights, or meetings for Campaign members have been systematically denied. Our website has been systematically blocked and filtered (over ten times). Newspapers and the press have been warned against covering news about our activities so use of the regular media to conduct education and outreach for our efforts is not an available option and we have had to rely on our face-to-face education strategies for spreading news about our efforts and demands. Also, our members have been arrested, despite the fact that our work is peaceful and civic and there is no law that bans the collection of signatures in support of petitions directed at the Parliament. To

date, 43 individuals have been arrested in direct relation to their activities in the Campaign. Because we have been systematically denied the use of public seminar and conference halls for the convening of our meetings, we are forced to hold meetings in our own homes. But these meetings too have been broken up by security forces, or homeowners have been harassed prior to the convening of meetings. Some homeowners have been called in for interrogation following meetings in their homes. Campaign activists who have been summoned to court or arrested have been charged with security charges, such as spreading of propaganda against the state and endangering national security. Despite these pressures, Campaign activists stand firm on the belief that their activities are legal and that they are not intended to endanger national security or spread propaganda against the state. As such, they are continuing with their activities with greater resolve. To read more about the pressures on Campaign activists take a look at the article, "Detentions and Summonses against Campaigners for Gender Equality."

Those Campaign activists who have been arrested and imprisoned for more than a few days, have systematically taken their activism inside women's prisons where many women have resorted to committing crimes, because the legal system did not support them in a just manner. These activists have taken it upon themselves to tell the stories of these women and to initiate efforts designed to improve their circumstances in prison. Needless to say, female prisoners in Evin's public ward, where most activists who have been incarcerated for any length of time have been held, as well as guards, have come to know and respect the activists involved in the Campaign as well as the aims of the Campaign, and treat activists well during their stay in prison.

### **If the Campaign is not working in opposition to the government, then why have there been so many arrests of activists?**

Addressing social inequities and patriarchal practices is difficult in all societies and women around the world have had to pay a high price for achieving equality. We don't believe that our movement is different than similar movements for equal rights by women internationally. There has always been resistance to change of patriarchal systems and the resistance to women gaining their rights in Iran can be classified as such. Additionally, citizen's movements such as this tend to be uncommon and a new experience in Iran. It takes time for officials to get used to people taking charge and pressing in peaceful and civil means for their demands and the right to be heard. While the Campaign is focused on the common demand of women for equal rights, we do feel that this new and peaceful approach, which does not utilize antagonistic means, will hold lessons for all citizens who wish to have their voices heard by their government and their representatives in Parliament.

### **How can international organizations or individuals support your effort?**

Many international organizations, especially human rights organizations, have expressed their support for our work, which we appreciate. The most important and helpful type of support comes from independent human rights and women's rights organizations. It is important for the safety of activists that support is not posed in terms that can be closely linked with "regime change" efforts or propaganda, because not only is this not a goal of the Campaign, but it will endanger activists working on the ground and the Campaign too will lose credibility among its true audience which is the Iranian public. It is not to the benefit of individual activists or the

Campaign to receive support from government groups or quasi- government groups which are closely linked with or are traditionally viewed as hostile to the Iranian government, because we will suffer a backlash at home. We cannot control the type of support we receive from international groups, but we urge international groups to take into consideration the best interest of the Campaign and its activists and act ethically and responsibly in this respect.

Support us through the following means:

- \* Support us by publicizing our efforts;
- \* Post our articles on your website: we have an English website that posts translations of articles by activists or original articles on the Campaign. Our English site is updated regularly. You can link our site or post articles by our members, which appear on our English website (credit should be given to the author, translator and the site). Take a look at: [www.we4change.com/english](http://www.we4change.com/english);
- \* Express your solidarity for the campaign in polite and non-political terms (we are not an opposition group and should not be touted as such);
- \* Support us when activists get arrested by writing polite letters to Iranian officials requesting their immediate release, their fair treatment in prison and in court, or by posting news on your website about our imprisoned colleagues; and
- \* Share with us experiences of women's movements in your countries addressing similar issues or utilizing similar strategies, so that we can learn from the experiences of women around the globe.