

Stop Stoning Forever Campaign; an Unfinished Story

Shadi Sadr

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Shadi Sadr is a human rights lawyer, journalist, co-founder of Raahi Women's Legal Centre in Iran, and winner of the Lech Wasela Prize.

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Only one year after the appointment of a fundamentalist government in Iran, in spring of 2006, rumors spread that two people, a man and a woman, were stoned in Mash'had. In the beginning, no one would believe it. Although stoning exists as a punitive act in the rules and regulations of Iran, governmental authorities announced that the Judiciary had stayed the enforcement of the "stoning" execution as a death penalty while in Human Rights negotiations with the European Union in 2002.

Further investigations and inquiries proved the validity of the news. Mahboubeh and Abbas were stoned under accusation of adultery. They were killed at dawn in a cemetery in the religious city of Mash'had, with stones thrown by armed forces or the volunteer militia according to Iran Penal Code, while they were wearing shrouds and buried up to their chests. Mahboubeh was forced into marriage with an addict and cruel man and had never managed to get a divorce; she was also accused of being an accomplice to the murder of her husband in collaboration with her lover. For the months following her stoning, nobody would dare to talk about Mahboubeh's case. The newspapers didn't want to write even a word about stoning, while others believed this had been an exceptional case and would not be repeated. Talking about stoning was a taboo at the time and printing anything about it would bring about serious risks for any newspaper.

In August 2006, Ashraf Kalhori, one of my clients in Evin prison, contacted and informed me that she has been summoned to court and informed that in 15 days her stoning judgment would be executed. I had visited Ashraf a couple of times in prison. She had previously gone to court with a complaint against her husband on account of his beating and physical violence towards her, but her request for divorce had been rejected due to lack of proper documentation and evidence. She denied being in any kind of sexual relationship with her husband's friend, who had killed him, but the court didn't take her defense into consideration

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in issuing the final verdict. At that time we were trying to think of a solution under the circumstances, as if standing at the edge of a pool, evaluating if we should raise awareness regarding Mahboubeh and Abbas's case in public, how to follow up on the stoning cases in the dominating situation with its strong censorship... when Ashraf's critical situation pushed us all into the pool. In the remaining, breathtaking 15 days until the execution, we were deprived of any media coverage at the local level. Therefore we took measures to raise awareness at the international level in order to gain support and assistance from Women's and Human Rights Organizations. We tried to reflect and disseminate the demands of many of the women's activists from inside the country concerning Ashraf Kalhori's case at the international level. We managed to collect 3000 signatures globally in a very short time, and finally stayed her execution. But our efforts were by no means enough. As long as stoning exists as a punitive act in the criminal law of the country, Ashraf and many other women are in danger of execution by stoning. Consequently, the "Stop Stoning Campaign" was established by a group of women's movement activists with the aim of omitting stoning from the Islamic Punitive Law.

On the eve of the Campaign launch, solidarity, cooperation at the local and international levels, and shared values were the key strategies adopted. These strategies would provide us the opportunity for collaboration between the most experienced transnational women's activists acting as consultants for the campaign. As the first step, in cooperation with Volunteer Lawyers Network, we conducted research in the prisons of each city all over the country in order to find out the number of women accused of adultery and who had received stoning verdicts. Finally, 11 women were identified, although we were aware that was an underestimate.

Each and every lawyer took up the case of one woman sentenced to death by stoning, and collected their testimonies. All of these women were the victims of diverse discriminations in their personal lives. Some of them had experienced forced marriage and others went through continuous violence; some were forced into prostitution by their addict husband and none could find a legal way of saving themselves from the miserable life they were living. Some had filed for divorce a couple of times but due to disagreement from within the family or rejection of their requests in court, they were forced to return to their life full of violence. Two of them were from very prejudice tribes in the Southern provinces of Iran and testified

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that they were confident that any attempt for divorce would invoke their relatives to kill them. Some had ultimately chosen to run away. In very rare cases, either accidentally or planned with the men with whom they had a relationship, some women participated in the murder of their husband. One way or another, all of them ended up in prison facing the nightmare of stoning.

Little by little, discourses on the campaign were formulated based on these testimonies. Before the establishment of the Campaign, only opposition forces operating against the Islamic Republic or a few international human rights organizations had addressed stoning based on their perspectives and views, but none had considered this serious issue in-depth. “Stop Stoning Campaign” elaborated on the gender dimension of this punitive measure by explaining the discriminative family codes, traditions, social and judicial patriarchal processes that made women more prone to receiving stoning verdicts than men, even though the law is equally defined for men and women. Based on the research conducted by Lawyers' Network, compared to 11 women accused of adultery with stoning sentences, there were only 2 men with the same verdict. It was only within the framework of this discourse that we managed to raise the issues of sexuality, omission of punitive measures for relationships out of marriage and freedom of choice regarding sex partners. These issues faced high resistance within the traditional society that would define us as the advocates of degradation and immorality.

Gradually, we acknowledged that given the brutal and inhumane nature of stoning, it can be a starting point to raise the issue on various legal discriminations against women. There are few people who would support stoning if they come to know that a woman is buried to her chest in her shroud and stones are thrown at her until death; repulsion and disgust of the audience regarding this violent act was an effective starting point for us to enhance further discussions on the issue both with people and the government. If women had the right to divorce they would never betray their husbands or kill them and then wait to be stoned. What actually has to be stoned, are the rules and regulations that target women by the stones in their daily life. In fact, stoning was a tool to create a more effective social discussion regarding women's rights.

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However, the Stop Stoning Campaign is not only trying to combat the law of stoning and have it omitted and save all those sentenced to death by stoning, but it also raises all legal demands of women at diverse social levels. Due to the efforts of the activists in this campaign, the dominating silence surpassing all the aspect of stoning broke and became a public debate. The judicial authorities, who were in denial of the fact that stoning was being executed as a punitive act, were obliged to be accountable to the reporters cooperating with the campaign covering Mahboubeh and Abbas' case in Mash'had and the long list of women under the same destiny. The announcement of the possibility of stoning of two other people (a man and a woman) in Takestan, a small city in the central part of Iran, attracted the attention of Iranian society and international community at the optimum level. Members of the campaign were informed of the execution of the stoning, two days before the verdict was actually carried out for Makromeh and Jafar. We had no choice but to mobilize public awareness to impose ultimate pressure on judicial authorities. In a 24 - hour campaign, through telephone numbers to be contacted that were announced in the news concerning this case, over one night, through the website of the campaign and other Internet media on a massive scale, we encouraged people to contact the Judiciary of Takestan and other related authorities and express their objection regarding the verdict. 12 hours before the execution time, an official news agency reported that the Head of Judiciary has ordered to stop the implementation process. However, three weeks later, two judges ordered their forces in command to execute the verdict of Jafar Kiani in a desert near Takestan, secretly. The death of Jafar Kiani mobilized other features, such as religious clergies and elites alongside the activists of the women's movement and human rights defenders in order to prove that stoning doesn't have roots in Quran and based on religious reasons it should be omitted. Even a high rank religious clergy decreed that in our modern world, stoning is prohibited.

Nevertheless, the campaign is faced a lot of challenges. Under circumstances in which civil society and the women's movement in Iran are experiencing increasing threat and oppression by the government, the Stop Stoning Campaign lacks any civil sphere for dialogue and by which it can make itself heard by society. It has been more than one year that the doors of conference halls and public places in which to hold seminars on stoning have been closed. RAHI, the institute that was assisting victims of stoning in collaboration with Lawyers' Network was shut down by the police forces of Revolutionary court and was deprived of the

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possibility and acidity. Journalists and civil society activists in other provinces active in this field were under pressure, threat and interrogation by security authorities and the situation is so that the government shows no direct reaction against the campaign but the influence and effectiveness of the campaign, which can lead to the change of the law and change of discriminative laws against women, are subtly and seriously narrowed and restricted. On the other hand, we have been accused in our own country that despite the objection of the people against war, we have used stoning as a tool to justify the necessity of war against Iran and we support military interventions by other countries.

Now, one year after the campaign started its activities, we can think back and consider our achievements. We managed to save three women, Parisa, Hajieh and Soghra, from stoning by the assistance of domestic and international civil society; we released them from prison and stopped the implementation of the stoning verdict of five other women, Ashraf, Kobra, Kheirieh, Iran and Mokarrameh. We also managed to raise the issue of stoning, which was previously considered taboo, amongst public, women's movement activists, journalists, elites and even high ranked governmental authorities and enhanced it. Deputy to the Head of Judiciary of Iran, has recently announced in an interview that there will soon be changes in the law of stoning, which will restrict its implementation significantly. Also, the Stop Stoning Campaign has been identified in the international arena as a credible institution combating stoning and defending women's rights.

After one year of daily efforts, stop stoning campaign activists in Iran decided to enhance their voice and make it more influential by establishing links and building a network against stoning and sexual punishments between themselves and other women in Islamic countries who face similar problems. Stop- Stoning campaign is a path to enhance the united voice of all of us who are trying to show that stoning, as a tool to control women's sexuality, has a direct link to religious and cultural fundamentalism, especially in Islamic countries. And it is just us who can, by an international movement, say "NO" to sexual punishment forever.