Title
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Face to Face and Street to Street:
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for Iran’s One Million Signatures Campaign

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“Transnational feminism” is no longer a new term, but the precise perils and benefits of this amorphous concept must be examined anew in each context. In this paper I present preliminary thoughts on just what these perils and benefits might be for the Iranian One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality. I argue that this movement is a transnational phenomenon and then discuss what it seems to be gaining through transnational feminist practices, and what it stands to lose.

The One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality

The One Million Signatures Campaign was founded in 2006, but formal strategizing began three years earlier when Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi met with women activists from various organizations in Iran and urged them to unite and organize for women’s rights. These women assessed their political needs and opportunities and determined that a targeted, demand-centered effort addressing specific unfair laws would be the best way to attract broad public support across often-divisive ideological, religious, and class lines. By calling the movement a campaign (the word is transliterated into the Persian name and distinguished from a formal organization) the more than fifty founding members were careful to signal a grassroots movement independent from political parties, government institutions and (foreign and domestic) non-governmental organizations (Tahmasebi, 2008; Khorasani, 2009).

The campaign is an effort to collect one million signatures of Iranian nationals urging the Majles (parliament) to change gender-discriminatory laws, including those regulating marriage and divorce, inheritance, blood money, age of criminal responsibility, and citizenship. (Tahmasebi, 2008; http://www.we-change.org/english/). Central to this process is a public education effort using signature-gathering to inform fellow Iranians
about women’s rights under the country’s constitution. Campaign members—anyone who wants to gather signatures is a member—work “face to face and street by street,” bringing the petition to women and men in parks, on buses, or anywhere else they can reach the public (http://www.we-change.org/english/). Members argue that the use of direct-action tactics and the campaign’s feminist character—attending to women’s strategic gender interests rather than being social service-oriented—make it unique in the country (Tahmasebi, 2008; Khorasani, 2009).

The One Million Signatures Campaign as Transnational Phenomenon

The goals of the One Million Signatures Campaign are certainly nationally-focused. I argue, however, that in using practices that bolster and extend the framework, support, and tactics of the movement across national borders, the campaign is transnational. I find Kaplan and Grewal’s theorizing of “transnational” useful here as a term that allows the tracing of “circuits that are produced by problematic political, economic, and social phenomena” (2002:73). This definition enables us to examine movements on any geographic scale while taking account of the historical circumstances, unequal power relations, and capital and cultural flows through and against which they must operate. I also borrow from Kaplan and Grewal the term “transnational feminist practices” as an alternative to reifying a monolithic concept of “transnational feminism” that erases differences of location and power among women. Thinking in terms of practices enables a discussion of “forms of alliance, subversion, and complicity within which asymmetries and inequalities can be critiqued” (ibid).

The One Million Signatures Campaign uses a number of transnational practices to publicize women’s demands, educate global publics, leverage support, and protect local
activists from government repression in a manner that facilitates collaboration while maintaining independence and local authenticity. These practices include the use of global communications media, travel to international conferences, and relationships with Diaspora and other populations around the world doing their own work to support the campaign.

The campaign’s extensive website is a central component of its transnational communications practice. The site, which is translated from Persian into six languages, contains an explanation of the campaign goals, a brief history, and an opportunity to sign the petition online or print a pdf file to gather more signatures. There are announcements of recent developments for the movement, including reports of arrests of campaign members and calls for their release. The section called “Face-to-Face” mirrors the campaign’s on-the-ground public education technique by providing a forum for members to write about their experiences as activists, express what their experience means to them, or present a critique (http://www.we-change.org/english/; Ardalan, 2009).

Relationships with the Iranian Diaspora have also been important. People around the world have signed the petition online in solidarity, and activists in France, Germany, Italy, and California have begun their own groups to support the campaign. In addition to this online support, activists, academics and others in Diaspora have supported the campaign in large numbers by donating money, inviting campaign members to give public talks, and by using their influence with their own governments to pressure the Iranian government to release political prisoners.

Finally, the campaign’s discursive practices can also be viewed as transnational in the sense articulated by Sonia Alvarez, referring to “local movement actors’ deployment
of discursive frames and organizational and political practices that are inspired, (re)affirmed or reinforced—though not necessarily caused—by their engagement with other actors beyond national borders through a wide range of transnational contacts, discussions, transactions, and networks, both virtual and ‘real’” (2000:2-3). Campaign members’ use of a “language of rights” (Tohidi 1994) is a good example of a practice that is influenced by international discourses of human- and women’s rights, but which is also very much of the local context.

The articulation of rights for women is not new in Iranian history, but it became a particularly fraught framework immediately after the 1979 revolution, when women who protested Ayatollah Khomeini’s gender policies as impinging upon women’s rights were painted as “westoxicated.” During the 1990s the public discussion of women’s rights within various feminist frameworks was recovered and elaborated by the women’s press, particularly by publishers such as Shahla Sherkat and Azam Taleqani, who published writings on the rights of women in politics and religion (Kar, 2001; Tohidi, 2002b). These struggles have helped shape a public debate in which the One Million Signatures Campaign can function as a women’s rights campaign.

**What is there to gain (or lose) by working transnationally?**

Transnational practices may be necessary today—even inevitable—in the face of global flows of power and capital, but such practices are not without peril for local groups. An expanded audience for the campaign’s message is perhaps the most obvious benefit of transnational practices. Interviews with foreign media and the use of websites and social networks (such as Facebook) have made it possible for Iranian women—even those who can’t travel abroad—to share their work, if not in an unmediated way, then at
least in their own words. Moral and material support (in the form of private donations) may result, and heightened visibility may have a protective effect against government repression and violence for some activists. The risk of appeals to a global audience is charges of foreign influence or traitorous behavior, however, which can have disastrous consequences for the activist so accused.

Another risk is that the message will be misappropriated by foreign governments or Diaspora groups (such as the Iranian Monarchist Movement) who have their own agendas vis-à-vis the Iranian government. Even well-intentioned feminists of the “Global North” may fail to see that the words of the activists who address them are mediated, and thus they may confuse Iranian activists’ perspectives with their own (Khorasani, 2009:78). Any of these misapprehensions could reinforce existing geopolitical, ethnocentric or Islamophobic relations of power. The campaign thus “need[s] international channels to expand [its] protests, but must appraise each one critically” (Khorasani, 2009:77).

Finally, transnational practices may either mitigate or reinforce power relations within the local society. The successes of and grassroots support for local activists can influence global brokers to demand of an organization that it demonstrate on-the-ground support, or participation from diverse segments of society, if it wants to receive funding. In so doing, global power brokers can enable marginalized populations of women to gain a foothold within locally or regionally hegemonic women’s movements (Alvarez, 2000). Campaign co-founder Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani claims that the campaign’s robust grassroots presence has already altered the ‘on-the-ground’ reality of organizational funding in Iran, though I cannot verify this (2009:82). On the other hand, the expense of international travel and the use, in global conferences, of foreign languages (such as
English) make transnational practice a privilege for some women, and may entrench local hierarchies and relations of power within a given society (Alvarez, 2000).

At this stage it is difficult to tell to what extent the One Million Signatures Campaign may be caught in these traps. The campaign is certainly under the watchful eye of government officials, but it is also gaining global recognition and support (http://www.we-change.org/english/). Many of the activists who are able to travel and speak about the campaign abroad are educated, often English speaking women, yet according to co-founder Sussan Tahmasebi, the campaign has wide appeal among women of lower socio-economic backgrounds and members of ethnic and religious minorities precisely because they are less able to mitigate the effects of legal discrimination with money or political connections (Tahmasebi, 2008). In either case I am sure the One Million Signatures Campaign will have much more to teach us about transnational feminist practices and solidarities in the future.


