

The Stolen Revolution: Iranian Women of 1979

By: CBC Radio

Adapted by Fishtank Staff



Iranian women were at the forefront of the revolution. But after the Shah was deposed and Ayatollah Khomeini returned to the country, everything that they'd been fighting for was threatened. (Hengameh Golestan)

- 1 "We didn't have a revolution to go backwards." That was the rallying cry which brought tens of thousands of Iranian women together onto the streets of Tehran on March 8, 1979.
- 2 After finally ousting the Shah, and just mere weeks after Ayatollah Khomeini took power, Iranian women marched to show their fury at the revolution, which now seemed to be turning against them.
- 3 On the 40th anniversary of their protests, CBC Radio producer **Donya Ziaee** spoke to three women who were on the streets of Tehran, fighting to to turn the tide of history.

'A historic naivete'

- 4 The 1979 Iranian revolution was about an idea: freedom. It was an idea that inspired huge contingents of women to oppose the Shah in unprecedented resistance. Minoo Jalali was one of them.
- 5 A retired lawyer who now lives in London, she was active in the 1979 revolution — and then in the women's protests that followed.

- 6 Like countless other Iranians, Jalali was driven to the streets by her opposition to brutal dictatorship, socio-economic inequality and foreign domination under the Shah.
- 7 On the streets, she says she saw a remarkable show of solidarity and courage: "It was a turning point when the army attacked and I think about 100 or so people were killed. And you could see that people were showing no fear."
- 8 "There was a defiance in the air, which was beautiful."



Opposition to the Shah was led by a broad coalition of people opposed to dictatorship, socio-economic inequality and the foreign domination of Iran. (Aristotle Saris/AP Photo)

- 9 But Jalali believes progressive forces largely underestimated the strength and organization of religious forces in those days. "They never thought that it would be a possibility for the clergy to take the power and rule," she says.
- 10 "That was our naivete — a historic naivete."
- 11 Jalali watched in disbelief and fear, as Islamic slogans took over street demonstrations and as women were asked at rallies to cover their heads. And then in February 1979, the Ayatollah officially took power, and the revolution was declared over.
- 12 Within weeks, he began his assault on minorities, the political opposition and women's rights. Like many others, Jalali had hoped that the revolution would provide a chance for different political organizations to articulate their vision for a new Iran.
- 13 "At that time there were potentials for other possibilities, but unfortunately we lost that opportunity," she says. "Iran lost a golden opportunity. And we have gone back in history." But Jalali doesn't believe the revolution itself was a mistake.

14 "That revolution was inevitable. Nobody could have really stopped the force of it," she says. "We hoped that we could steer it [but] we were wrong. And the clergy hijacked it ... and deceived many people."

The women who tried to save the revolution

15 Less than two weeks after the revolution, announcements began surfacing in newspapers about celebrations taking place on March 8, International Women's Day.

16 "We were going to celebrate the 8th of March freely and publicly for the first time in Iranian history," Haideh Daragahi recalls. Daragahi was then a professor of literature at the University of Tehran. She has been living in Sweden for the last 35 years.

17 In 1979, she helped organize one of several commemorations in Tehran for March 8. But on March 7, Ayatollah Khomeini decreed that women were now mandated to wear the veil in government offices, or — in Khomeini's words — to not enter the workplace "naked".

18 What were meant to be celebrations would turn into massive protests.



On March 8, 1979, Iranian women's celebrations of International Women's Day turned into protests against a new decree by Khomeini about mandatory veiling. (Hengameh Golestan)

19 Tens of thousands of women gathered in Tehran on the morning of March 8 outside the new Prime Minister's office, while another 3,000 went to protest in the religious city of Qom, where Khomeini resided.

20 That same morning, a large group of women pushed open the doors of a packed auditorium at Tehran University and interrupted the commemoration. The women told the auditorium about the verbal and physical attacks they'd faced on the streets from pro-regime thugs.

21 "Come out and see what they're doing to our march on the street," Daragahi recalls them saying.

- 22 But as the group tried to leave, they discovered that the gates had been locked. Daragahi and another woman climbed the gates and urged the pro-regime guards to let them go: "I screamed at them, 'Is this the freedom for which we all demonstrated and suffered?'"
- 23 On the streets, they joined thousands of others, chanting, "We didn't have a revolution to go backwards". Daragahi was resolute: "There was no question in our mind that this is the first step to suppress us and we should stand up to it – both as women [and] as revolutionaries."



The protests brought together women's rights activists and professional women, such as nurses and civil servants, who were concerned about losing their jobs. (Hengameh Golestan)

- 24 For six days straight, the women marched, and fought to take back their revolution. On the streets, women were attacked by counter-protestors, who assaulted them with knives, stones, bricks and broken glass.
- 25 But they also found unexpected allies among feminists from other countries. The American feminist Kate Millett, who'd accepted an invitation from student activists, marched with women in Tehran. The International Committee for Women's Rights, chaired by feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, sent a delegation in solidarity.
- 26 And the militant French feminist group, Psychoanalysis and Politics, marched on the streets and documented what they saw. Their 12-minute documentary remains the only existing film of those events.
- 27 The women's protests appeared to work. Just a few days after the March 8 demonstrations, the high-ranking theologian Ayatollah Taleghani retracted Khomeini's statements. And with that apparent victory, the women's mobilization — the first massive, collective resistance against the Islamic Republic — started to fizzle out.

'Doing the organizing ourselves'

- 28 Before the early 1980s, when the regime's violent crackdown on the opposition intensified, there was a brief flourishing of women's associations in the workplace, women-specific committees in political organizations, and even autonomous women's organizations that were independent of any political parties.



The protestors on the streets were attacked by chanting mobs. The only thing protecting them was a chain of male allies, who linked up arms to shield them. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

- 29 Shahin Navai led one of those organizations. She was a professor in entomology at the University of Tehran and helped found the National Union of Women (NUW) in 1979. "The most important question facing us then was whether we should start doing the organizing ourselves," Navai says, thinking back to the dismal support for their demonstrations.
- 30 The NUW intended to do just that. "It was clear to us that religious rule was coming. And we weren't willing to be subjected to religious rule under any circumstances," Navai says.
- 31 The NUW worked in support of women facing expulsion from work for their refusal to wear the veil. They campaigned against proposed changes to gender laws in the constitution. And they launched literacy and awareness-raising campaigns in working-class neighbourhoods and small towns.



In July 1980, hundreds of women gathered outside the presidential office to oppose the reinstatement of the veiling order. (AFP/Getty Images)

- 32 But it wasn't long before they had to cease their overt activities. And Navai, who was in charge of the group's communications, had to perform a gut-wrenching task. She spent an entire night burning membership lists, simply to keep them from getting into the hands of the police.
- 33 "All I did was cry," she remembers. "When I burnt them, I would just see — right in front of my eyes — the faces of each and every single one of my dear friends."
- 34 Soon afterwards, Navai's home and workplace were raided, and she then had to go underground herself. "It was really difficult," she says. "Under no circumstances could I visit my family." She spent months hiding in friends' homes, until she eventually fled Iran on foot over the Pakistan border.
- 35 "Sadly, I never did manage to see my mother," Navai remembers. "Two years after I left Iran, my mother got very ill. And until the very end, we never had the chance to see each other, and say goodbye."

40 years of resistance

- 36 By 1981, it became compulsory for all women in Iran above the age of 9 to wear the veil. Other changes also followed: gender segregation in the workplace, schools, beaches and sporting events. And a slew of new laws governing divorce, child custody, inheritance, citizenship and retribution, all tipping the scales against women.
- 37 In response, feminist activists organized various campaigns over the years. And in their day-to-day lives, women kept resisting.



- 38 In December 2017, a young woman named Vida Movahed climbed on top of a utility box on one of Tehran's busiest streets. And she stood there, bareheaded, calmly waving her white scarf on a long stick.
- 39 Her display of defiance went viral. Photos soon started circulating of other Iranian women taking off their headscarves in public.
- 40 Dozens were arrested but these women were undeterred. Together, they became known as "daughters of revolution."
- 41 For many Iranian women revolutionaries of 1979, it's been heartening to see the younger generation carry the torch they lit 40 years ago.
- 42 "It's no joke," Navai adds. "For 40 years straight, these women have fought — every hour of every day — for their demands."
- 43 "It's impossible to imagine Iran without the resistance of these women. Iran would be nothing more than a graveyard."
- 44 "There is nothing that one can do except have faith in the Iranian people," Jalali says. "That struggle ... that flame of resistance, has never died out."