Women's Leadership for Women's Rights and Democracy

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Women in Leadership:
Litmus Test for Democracy in the Middle East and Iran

Women’s Freedom Forum, U.S. House of Representatives
February 27, 2014

Honorable Elaine Chao (24th US Secretary of Labor), Patti Solis Doyle (Former campaign managers for Hillary Clinton), Soona Samsami (U.S. Representative, National Council of Resistance of Iran), Frances Belisle (Professor, Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness Program, Virginia Commonwealth University), Ruth Wedgewood (Professor, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University), Donna Hughes (Professor, University of Rhode Island), Senator Sandy Pappas (President of Minnesota Senate, Founder of Forward Global Women), Ingrid Betancourt (Colombian Presidential Candidate, Former Senator & Anti-Corruption Activist), and Antonia Felix (New York Times bestselling author of 16 books)
Message from Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi

Dear friends, I join with you in affirming the crucial idea that women's rights are human rights. Today's speakers have fought tirelessly for the rights of women and girls. International Women's Day is an opportunity to celebrate the progress we have made equality and to recommit to the future of security and success for all woman.

It is our duty to empower women within their communities to ensure that no woman is forced to fear for her own safety in her own home and to extend the promise of equal rights, equal pay, and equal opportunity to every woman. It is our responsibility to help our mothers, daughters and granddaughters receive an education, join the work force, access quality healthcare, choose their leaders and lead their nations. When women succeed, communities around the world succeed.
We are here today to celebrate International Women’s Day, and to use this occasion to discuss why we need women in leadership positions for the success of democracy in the Middle East and Iran.

First we need women’s leadership for women rights and equality. I believe that women’s rights are human rights and they are central for democracy and peace in the 21st century.

The need for women’s leadership for women wellbeing may be obvious, but it must be said. Without women naming and calling attention to the harm women and girls suffer, there will be no change.
I have worked on the topic of sex trafficking for almost 20 years. None of the progress we have made raising awareness and making efforts to combat sexual exploitation and modern-day would have happened without the work and leadership of women.

The first movement against sex trafficking was launched in England by a Christian feminist named Josephine Butler (1828-1906). She saw the suffering of women in prostitution and reached out to help poor and sick women from the street and the workhouse, even inviting them into her middle-class home for rest and healing---when healing was possible. Then, before the discovery of antibiotics, victims died of sexually transmitted diseases, like syphilis; today, victims die of sexually transmitted diseases, like AIDS.

In the mid-1860s, organizing to abolish slavery was fresh in people’s minds. Led by Josephine Butler, members of families who had been abolitionists against the slave trade renewed their campaigns against what they came to call “white slavery.” Today, we call it sex trafficking, the exploitation and often enslavement of women, girls, men and boys in prostitution.

The anti-sexual exploitation movement has always listened to victims and survivors. Josephine Butler listened to the women in the workhouse talk about their experiences of prostitution. Today, some of the strongest anti-sex trafficking organizations are led by former victims, called survivors, who give authentic voices to the movement.

Although women must take the leadership in naming violence against them, there are always men who recognize the harm and unfairness of this violence and lend their support to campaigns. The anti-white slave trade movement included male abolitionists and men from the working class who saw their wives and sisters harassed in the streets and accused of being prostitutes by the police. Today, there are men who strongly support the anti-sex trafficking movement.

Today, we are looking at women’s leadership for democracy in the Middle East and Iran. Over the past five years, we have seen protests sweep across countries controlled by dictators. Some of been successful in over throwing dictators.

In 2009, there was an uprising against dictatorship in Iran, following the contested re-election of Ahmadinejad. Women were fully active in the protests. The protestors started out chanting “Where is my vote?” But as the protests continued, the protestors became emboldened and started to chant “Death to the dictator.” These were not reformist voices, they were revolutionary voices calling for an end to the religious dictatorship which came to power in 1979. Although the majority of people have suffered in some way under the theocratic regime, women have been targeted and suffered the most.

Under sharia law, which is law based on their interpretation of the Quran, implemented by the leaders of Iran, women and girls’ rights and personal freedoms are severely restricted and violently suppressed. Women have the most to gain by supporting the overthrow of the current regime in Iran and they have been actively resisting since the early days of the regime.

Then under the label of “Arab Spring,” uprisings and revolutions swept across the Middle East. Women have been full participants in the uprisings throughout the Arab world. They are seeking to be citizens with rights and opportunities in countries free of dictators.
In Egypt, women protested equally with men. They were full of hope for the future of Egypt where there would be equality for women. Some women experienced euphoria during the days of demonstration in Tahrir Square. One woman activist said, “It became surreal how perfect the relationship between men and women was. For a month I never thought I was a girl. No one ever looked at me like I was a girl.”

But there are many forces opposed to women’s rights and democracy. While some Egyptian women were thinking their revolution had come, violent vigilantes were targeting women in Tahrir Square. Sexual harassment of women has long plagued women of Egypt, but it became a tactic to discourage women from joining the demonstrators. Sexual harassment escalated to violence and sexual assault in an attempt to humiliate the women protestors and make them stay at home.

The women’s rights activists and the pro-democracy movements in the Middle East and Iran have discovered that revolutions will not be easy. The most organized and entrenched opponents to democracy and women’s rights are the Islamist organizations and factions that support sharia law. The strongest is the theocratic dictatorship in Iran, which has held power since 1979.

Although the theocracy is 35 years old, it has not modified its misogynous view of women or reduced its suppression of citizens. Over the past year, the regime has increased the number of executions, most of them by hanging. In 2013, Iran executed between 500 and 625 people, including 28 women and two juveniles. So far this year, there have been 113 executions. Many of the hangings are carried out in public, to terrorize people into being afraid to organize and protest.

There are some exceptional women leaders who have organized and trained to resist the Iranian regime. They are members of the Iranian resistance, which formed after being forced into exile with Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. They have lived in exile in Iraq since the 1980s.

Although the U.S. granted these 3,000 persons protected person status, it embarrasses me to say that the U.S. has not honored the promise to protect them. They have been subjected to missile attacks and massacres.

Since the U.S. granted these pro-democracy activists protected person status, 116 of them have been killed and 1200 wounded in seven attacks. Nine have been abducted and 18 have died because they were prohibited from receiving prompt medical treatment.

These 3000 pro-democracy activists are being held captive in conditions like a concentration camp. They are subjected to daily harassment and denied fresh food, water, and sanitation.

I do not understand why the U.S. State Department cannot use its influence to stop the murders and free the kidnapped people. These criminal acts have been perpetrated against people that the U.S. promised to protect.

The leader of this Iranian opposition group is a woman named Maryam Rajavi. Her analysis of the gender apartheid under which Iranian women live offers a profound political analysis of how

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the rule of the theocratic dictatorship is based on gender inequality, misogyny, and the daily surveillance of women in public.

Since the Iranian regime came to power in 1979, it has killed tens of thousands of Iranians, including thousands of women. The price of women’s rights and democracy are often very high.

The following is a quote from an International Women’s Day speech by Maryam Rajavi entitled *The Price of Freedom*:

“A woman achieves her rights; no one will grant her freedom and emancipation..... Women must resist, so that they path of freedom [will] be opened and paved. ...The first step...is to believe that we can. We can and must struggle to become free and free others. This is the serious reality and the spirit that runs in the veins of this resistance and all its men and women. .... But we must never forget that there is a price to pay for freedom.”

We, the people in this room are free. We support democracy and we have freedom of speech. We are meeting in one of the houses of the government of the greatest democracy in the world. But we have not lived up to our promises to our friends.

A democracy is only as good as our leaders, who are only as good as the citizens compel them to be.

We must do better as women leaders for women’s rights, democracy and for our friends abroad.

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