

Iran: Women successfully lobby government to reform family law

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10/09/2008: The Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) international solidarity network welcomes the news that Iranian lawmakers have amended a contentious new family law proposal, marking a major victory for Iranian women's rights activists. (WLUML Networkers)

Various Iranian women's organizations have campaigned against the law since its introduction in the Parliament last year. Activists say that the proposed legislation contained numerous articles that would reverse past gains made by women's rights leaders over the last thirty years and significantly harm the status of Iranian women within the family.

The bill was set to a vote last week, before the Parliament adjourned for Ramadan. Before that vote took place, one hundred women's rights defenders stormed the Parliament building to register their protest to lawmakers. Because mass demonstrations are often considered illegal in Iran, the women entered gradually in groups of three or four until they presented en masse to voice their criticism with the new bill. As a result, the proposed law was sent back to the legal commission for further review, postponing the vote in Parliament.

On Sunday, the spokesman for the Ministry of Justice announced they have amended the law, removing articles 23 and 25, the most contentious among women's rights activists. The revised law will be sent to the Parliament for vote after Ramadan.

Article 23, one of the most criticized articles in the bill, would make polygamy easier for Iranian men. Currently, an Iranian man needs to obtain the permission of his first wife in order to marry a second. These safeguards would be effectively removed for women in the proposed legislation.

Article 25 would have taxed women's mehr, a monetary sum given by the groom to the bride, which is often considered a protection for women against arbitrary divorce by their husbands.

Women from various backgrounds, religious and secular, had come together to mobilize against the new family law, initiating a public debate via online journals such as www.meydaan.org, running a postcard campaign, and encouraging ordinary women from across the country to phone their representative and register their protest against the proposed legislation.

Nevertheless, WLUML is still not satisfied with amended legislation, even without Articles 23 and 25. The bill, which is presented by the government as family law "reform", does not in fact provide more gender equality according to activists.

WLUML calls upon the Iranian authorities to work directly with women's rights advocates to pass true family law reform, one that wholly prohibits discrimination against women in all its forms. We urge the Iranian legal and judicial systems to ensure Iranian women enjoy the same rights and responsibilities as men during marriage and at its dissolution, including matters related to inheritance, custody and guardianship of children, and blood price.

Furthermore, we call upon Iranian officials to unequivocally ban polygamy under the law.

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* Source: WLUML Networkers, 10 September 2008.