

LEAF *let*

The newsletter of West Coast LEAF
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Still Standing Tall

By Mehrak Mehrvar

The story of the Iranian women's movement and its relationship to the Islamic state is closely intertwined with the story of the Iranian Revolution and its dynamics. Political change in Iran brought about a fundamental change in the way women activists viewed reforms and new strategies for achieving desired social and legal changes for women's equality rights.

“THIS NEW WAVE OF FEMINISTS, with their unconventional interpretations of Islam, is challenging and reforming Islamic doctrine from within while using the language of the religious/political leaders. They clearly demand that the state must live up to its promise of Islamic equality of men and women.”

Three decades after the revolution, the women's movement in Iran has tried various routes to challenge the discriminatory legal frameworks against women in areas such as employment, divorce, inheritance and custody rights, among others. In this path, the women became divided and adopted two different approaches. One suggests that the best way to silence the conservative critics, who accuse the women's movement of being a Western import with an aim to undermine religious values, is to construct a broad and inclusive manifesto within the framework of Islam. This new wave of feminists, with their unconventional interpretations of Islam, is challenging and reforming Islamic doctrine from within while using the language of the religious/political leaders. They clearly demand that the state must live up to its promise of Islamic equality of men and women.

On the contrary, the second approach rejects the structure in the first place and emphasizes methods to create local and



Many of the women involved in the women's movement in Iran have been jailed, but they are still standing strong!

international pressure on the Islamic state and to use that leverage to raise awareness of and to abolish the discriminatory laws. One of the activities this group launched in 2006 was the “One Million Signatures Campaign”, which was a peaceful and civil effort intended to collect signatures to pressure Parliament to reform discriminatory laws against women. Since then a number of campaigners have been threatened, accused of seeking a “velvet revolution”, been summoned to court, charged with security crimes and sentenced to prison. The campaign's website has also been blocked several times. However, campaigners still believe they have been successful as they have brought women's equality issues in Iran to the centre of both the local and international scene.

Last but not least, what deserves special note is that while women activists from both camps may appear to be more or less opposed, in practical terms the two camps are close allies and their demands are generally analogous as both groups strive to improve women's social and legal situations. In fact, in both camps women have paid and are paying high prices for their activism and efforts for women's equality. **Nonetheless, both are still standing tall!** 🌱

Miller Thomson presents the

EQUALITY BREAKFAST 2008

We invite you to join us and **Dr. Shirin Ebadi**, Nobel Peace Prize winner and Women's Rights Activist

at West Coast LEAF's **Equality Breakfast**
on Friday, February 29, 2008, at the Hyatt Regency Vancouver

WERF Has Come a Long Way (Baby!)

Women's Equality and Religious Freedom project

By Kelly Roulette, Legal Director

Community consultations to discuss women's equality and religious freedom began in earnest in December 2004, as a way for WCL to tackle the legal complexities behind the issue of polygamous marriage.

While the BC community of Bountiful was the main topic on the agenda due to its modern day practice of polygamy, an other topic of discussion was the practice of Sharia law in Ontario, an ancient law that provides jurisprudence to Muslim marriages, and which is a major departure from any Canadian law that regulates marriage or marital type unions.

A number of lawyers, academics and members of various religious communities from across Canada took part in the two day National conference and its eventual findings were documented in a report by Alison Brewin entitled *Women's Equality and Religious Freedom Consultation* WERF .

This marked the creation of West Coast LEAF's WERF Project, developed to look at the wider question of how women of faith reconcile the issue of equality within their religious faith since most religions are based historically on patriarchal norms and dogma.

This issue became the main focus of another series of WERF consultations held locally during 2006. Facilitated by Harsha Walia, a UBC law student and former employee of WCL, these consultations took the form of a multi faith advisory committee, comprised of women committed to equality and who closely identified with their faith communities. The findings resulted in a report authored by Harsha released in November 2006. Today the WERF project is in its final stage and is spearheaded by Mehrak Mehrvar, who holds a law degree from Iran and specializes in Sharia Muslim Law (see bio, right). The project has been taken in a new direction with interviews being held with religious leaders from local Synagogues, Mosques and Buddhists temples. All have been asked to discuss the role of women within religious faith and to provide opinions about the controversy surrounding the practice of polygamy.

The last set of consultations, scheduled to start early this year, will focus specifically on the women of faith themselves. They will be members who follow the different faiths of religious leaders already contacted for interviews thus far. One group of women has already been shut out for consultation by its leader who would only offer to "speak on behalf of the women." WCL, of course, declined.

A final report encompassing data collected from all three community consultations is expected out later this year. The goal is to use its findings to support potential WCL court action or future law reform recommendations to challenge the inequality of women and abuse of children within polygamous marriage.



BIO: MEHRAK MEHRVAR

Mehrak Mehrvar began spearheading the final phase of the WERF project early last year shortly after immigrating to Canada. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Islamic Law from the Shaihd Beheshti University in Tehran, Iran, and a Master degree in Gender and Development from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, England.

For the past 8 years, she has worked as a gender activist with the United Nations and other bilateral agencies in countries such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Before moving to Vancouver, Mehrak was stationed in Banda Ache, Indonesia, by the UN Development Fund for Women as a gender advisor to the Minister of the Agency for Rehabilitation and Reconstruction in the aftermath of the 2005 Tsunami. There Mehrak facilitated the development of a joint land titling policy and a gender mainstreaming strategy. Currently Mehrak is a support advisor to the Ministry of Interior in Cambodia and is sponsored by the German and Australian Governments. This work focuses mainly on gender mainstreaming in judiciary and decentralization reforms in Cambodia.

Speak Up for Equality!

West Coast LEAF is conducting a short survey for direction on our Speakers Bureau program. Please go to our website (www.westcoastleaf.org).

FAMILY LAW PROJECT

By Anne-Marie McElroy

West Coast LEAF's Family Law Project FLP recently made submissions to the provincial government in Phases II and III of the Family Relations Act Review. The FLP collaborated with UBC's Centre for Feminist Legal Studies to provide current and relevant academic research from BC and other jurisdictions. These sources helped to ground the submission in gender based research about primary care giving, family violence, racism, immigration, poverty, Aboriginal identity, disability, LGB and T issues, and to focus on tools and approaches that give women equal access to family law services.

The sections of the review included spousal support, mediation, co operative parenting, family violence and the question of defining legal parenthood. In the submission, these issues were framed in the context of Charter rights, Canada's international commitments, and the reality of the cuts to legal aid in BC. In recognizing these factors, the submissions highlight how women often face multiple barriers in accessing adequate family law services, and that the legislation must be drafted to accommodate and alleviate these challenges.

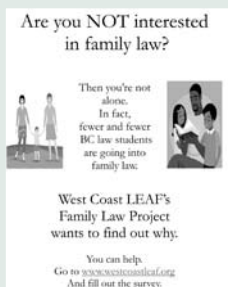
The Family Law Project now moves onto the next step of the review process, which will be to facilitate more discussion, training and public legal education among front line community advocates and the family law bar.

Anne Marie McElroy is a second year law student at the University of Ottawa Faculty of Law. She was a law intern with the Family Law Project at West Coast LEAF in January 2008. She did research, compiled reports, and was actively involved in creating the Family Law Student Survey for the Family Law project.

Family Law Survey

The Family Law Project FLP is currently conducting a Family Law Student Survey posted on our website www.westcoastleaf.org. We are seeking input from law students and articling students about their impressions of family law as a practice area and their feedback about why they would or would not choose to enter the practice of family law. The FLP is hoping the Family Law Student Survey will provide a "snapshot" of the perception and possible strategies for supporting law students in their pursuit of family law. In addition, the FLP would be eager to hear from existing family law lawyers about their experiences of practicing law.

Please forward this feedback directly to the FLP at familylaw@westcoastleaf.org. Thank you and we look forward to your support of this WCLEAF Family Law Project initiative!



THIS MONTH'S VOLUNTEER PROFILE

West Coast LEAF board member since 2006, Jan O'Brien is the new chair of the Law and Government and Liaison Committee. She is also a member of the West Coast LEAF Themis Monthly Giving Club.

Since 2006, Jan has worked with the BC Government and Service Employees' Union's advocacy department and is responsible for representing the union at BC Labour Relations Board and arbitration hearings.



“IT IS EXCITING TO WORK WITH community organizations to see how much equality women are experiencing in different parts of their lives. This practical on the ground work leads to recommendations for legal remedies to expand equality rights”.

Previously, Jan was a vice chair at the Labour Relations Board for six years. She has been active in the trade union movement for more than 20 years including six years as a vice president of the BC Federation of Labour, where she chaired the Women's Rights Committee.

Jan's career includes time as co ordinator of the Capilano College Labour Studies program as well as 10 years as a top officer of Local 115-M of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union and its predecessor, the Vancouver Newspaper Guild, where she negotiated pay equity in the private sector. Jan has an MBA from Simon Fraser University. As an undergrad student at UBC, she was a founding organizer of the first women's studies program.

INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING...

West Coast LEAF is looking to recruit new members for the Legal Committee and Law and Government Liaison Committee. We're looking for lawyers, legal professionals or policy analysts with a keen interest in women's equality rights and who have a minimum of five hours a month to contribute. PLEASE email Kelly Roulette at legal@westcoastleaf.org

Investing in Women's Equality...

West Coast LEAF is grateful for the support that we receive from our donors and members. Your valued support ensures that we can fulfill our mission to advance women's equality in the law. Thank you for your investment in West Coast LEAF that makes our litigation, law reform and education work possible.



West Coast LEAF is generously supported by the Law Foundation of BC and we are grateful for their ongoing core funding and financial support for our Family Law Project and Aboriginal No Means No educational program.



Thank you to the Ethical Bean Coffee Company for their support in generously providing our office with coffee. We are pleased to partner with such a socially responsible company. Please visit www.ethicalbean.com.



We would like to acknowledge BC Gaming for providing valuable funding to our education programs.



Heritage Canada is generously supporting our Aboriginal No Means No youth workshop project.



We'd like to thank the Health Sciences Association for their support of our Speakers Bureau.



Thank you to the Notary Foundation for their support of our Women's Equality and Religious Freedom project, which has allowed us to conduct research and focus groups in our third and final phase of this project.



The Vancouver Foundation Youth Philanthropy Council is supporting West Coast LEAF and our Youth in the Workplace and No Means No programs. We value their generous support and partnership.



We appreciate the support of Status of Women Canada, who provided multi-year funding for our ongoing Family Law Project.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Miller Thomson presents the 2008 West Coast LEAF Equality Breakfast

The 2008 Equality Breakfast takes place on Friday, February 29, 2008 at 7:00 a.m. We invite you to join us and Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Shirin Ebadi at West Coast LEAF's Equality Breakfast at the Hyatt Regency Vancouver. Tickets can be purchased for 75.00 each. They are selling quickly, so order yours today! Order forms are available online www.westcoastleaf.org or by calling 604 684 8772 or toll free 1 866 737 7716.

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Editing & Writing:
West Coast LEAF staff



West Coast LEAF is a provincial organization committed to promoting women's equality rights before Canadian lawmakers and ensuring that the promise of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms becomes a reality for the women of British Columbia.

Thank You!

THEMIS CLUB

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Join the Themis Monthly Giving Club!

Monthly Giving is the best way to support West Coast LEAF. It provides sustainable revenue, reduces administrative costs, and helps us to plan for the future. Please contact Fiona York at 604.684.8772 ext. 113 for more details.