

Bio: **Mahnaz Afkhami** (Iran/U.S.) "is Founder and President of the Women's Learning Partnership, Executive Director of the Foundation for Iranian Studies, and former Minister of State for Women's Affairs in Iran."<sup>1</sup>



"In exile in the United States, Ms. Afkhami has been a leading advocate of women's rights for more than three decades, having founded and served as director and president of several international non-governmental organizations that focus on advancing women's status. Most recently she was President of Sisterhood Is Global Institute. Ms. Afkhami also serves on advisory boards and steering committees of a number of national and international organizations including Commission on Globalization, The Global Fund for Women, International League for Human Rights, Women's Human Rights Net, Women's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, World Movement for Democracy, and Youth Employment Summit. Her numerous publications have been widely translated and distributed internationally."<sup>2</sup>

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An Interview with Mahnaz Afkhami  
Conducted by Leadership Scholar Hera Mir, Class of 2011  
Edited by Nicholas Salazer

**Hera Mir: What was your life like in Iran? What do you remember from your childhood before you came to the United States and then as a women's rights activist?**

**Mahnaz Afkhami:** My childhood in Iran was a very idyllic one. I had a very happy family. A very large extended family. My family was in agriculture. They had orchards of various kinds, pistachios and oranges of various kinds. The extended family was a very jolly family and a very fun loving one. The women in it had considerable authority and power. They managed their own property. They held onto their own property. It involved working with farmers, male farmers. They managed it and they had respect doing the work they did. It was both fun and happy at the same time. It was a good experience in the kind of warmth and togetherness that an extended family can bring and in the ways women can, even in a traditional society. Even in difficult circumstances they can manage and they do it well.

**HM: Can you describe your mom for me?**

**MA:** My mom was in every way a beautiful woman. She was a beautiful soul, generous, nourishing, supporting, giving, physically beautiful, and at the same time very strong. She made

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Learning Partnership (WLP). "Mahnaz Afkhami | Women's Learning Partnership." *Women's Learning Partnership | For Rights, Development, and Peace*. Learningpartnership.org, 9 Nov. 2010. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.learningpartnership.org/node/1721>>.

<sup>2</sup> See above

her own choices. She consulted wildly, with all sorts of people, making every one of them think, he or she is the one and only advisor, but in the end she made her own choice. She was courageous. She left my father when she was around thirty [and] I was around twelve years old at the time. She came all the way to the United States, went back to college and supported the three children and her college career by working. Coming from a very well off background and from a third-world kind of an environment where she was served constantly and she had every thing she wanted. Going and working in a canary to support her children and to go to university. It was extremely interesting.

The thing that was exceptional about her was her capability to be soft and kind. And to be responsive and to be emotionally very generous, but at the same time strong as a rock.

**HM: Can you give me an example of a childhood experience that helped make you think of feminism?**

**MA:** I think what I just described for you. The very huge decision that she made, and we are talking now in the late 1950s in the United States, to come from across the world with no financial backing. [She] didn't even speak English. To come all the way from San Francisco, [originally] from Kerman, to support herself, to go to school and take care of three children—was an amazing feat.

My grandmother many, many years ago, when she was a young woman, almost one hundred years ago, she was a single mother, entrepreneur in a dusty city in the south of Iran called Kerman. She rode a bicycle. She had her own business. She designed clothes and had a group who worked with her. She conducted herself as an independent single mother and raised my mother to want an education, to want to go to the university. My mother was one of the first three women in Iran to enter the university. She also wanted to have an independent existence, to make choices, to be exerting a power and so forth.

The women in my family, my grandmother and my mother, were my greatest inspiration. But there was also this idea that learning was very much admired. My father was not a feminist by any means, but he always thought that I should study [and] go to graduate school. There was never any question that I would work at some point and have my own economic independence. I think that environment helped to me a great deal to shape my experience.

I must tell you a short anecdote. When I came with my mother to the United States, I was very young. I went to high school here and to the university at age sixteen. I started working at the dime store at the time. It would be the dollar store now, but what happened was that they fired me at holiday time and then rehired me. And I asked the older woman, who was my immediate boss, why is this? How could that be? Being fired and then rehired I lose my holiday. She told me to go to the union and talk to the union about it. So, I went into San Francisco, where I lived at the time, went to the local 1100, which was the union that involved us. Here, I was a sixteen-year old young person with pretty shaky legs walking up the stairs going to this big meeting, but

in the meeting at the end there was a question, “Does any one have any complaints?” And I told the union leader my complaint and she said, “We’ll take care of you.” And she did.

Later, the great boss of this whole chain came to me and said, “We heard that you had some worries, we want to make sure you’re reimbursed for your holiday and next time if you have a problem come to me.” Now, I am telling you this anecdote because it is really the underlying faith that was created in that, if you work together, if you speak out, if you say what your rights are and demand them, because people are not going to hand them to you on a platter and your work collectively, you can get what is coming to you. You can achieve justice and that has been an experience in my life that has taught me to advocate, to struggle with others collaboratively and how to keep the optimism; that no matter what, even when a horrendous fundamental revolution that has wiped out all that you have achieved, you can go right ahead, work for rights, and achieve them.

**HM: When did you discover feminism and what does feminism mean to you?**

**MA:** I discovered feminism through Kate Millets, “Sexual Politics.” The second chapter was very eye opening for me. The readings of the feminist leaders in the sixties and seventies were very helpful to me, but I think this was the theoretical discovery of feminism. The actual life experience of it came much earlier. I think [it was] witnessing the choices my grandmother made, the choices my mother made, and the way they conducted their lives. So, there were two aspects. The pragmatic practical one, coming from my family, and at the same time my young students at the university and their approach. But the theoretical came from those writings.

Feminism, to me, [is] a belief in worth, dignity, rights, and individual capability of all human beings, as a struggle for achieving full rights for everybody. On both levels, the way the world is perceived in feminism, there is justice, equality, aspirations, and the way that we move toward achieving those.

**HM: After you graduated from college, what were your career goals? What did you see yourself becoming?**

**MA:** I always wanted to be a writer and I wanted to teach literature. I really didn’t seek or think of public life or civic engagement, but I got drawn into it. Once I got into it there were no ifs or buts, no doubts, and no second-guessing. I have never regretted that I have spent my life working for women’s rights.

**HM: How did you get involved in women’s rights?**

**MA:** Actually, quiet indirectly. I studied literature in the United States and I went to Iran. And started teaching literature at the National University. My students were mostly girls, as most literature classes tend to draw more women. We got very much involved in the narratives fiction and the personalities of the fictional characters that we came across in the novels and short

stories of the English language. There, the women who were Iranian and had grown up in Iran saw examples of women making choices, connecting their lives or their lifestyles to a certain independence that they showed and a certain access to privacy that they had, which wasn't customary in their environment. They became very interested in reaching for their rights that was native for them, original for them and grew out of their experience, their past and their roots. We started with these young women to explore those possibilities; how you bridge culture and religion, identity with rights. So, we started an organization called Association of University Women and it grew like wildfire. In less than a year there were four hundred students and professors who were members. They explored with knowledgeable people, experts every area of modernity, and of indigenous culture vis-à-vis rights, music, poetry, religion, tradition, everything.

That's when I began to think with my students about rights. What do they mean? And how do they relate to other aspects of our life? How do they govern the choices we make? How do we struggle to achieve them in different societies, with people from a variety of backgrounds and ways of conducting their lives? That's how I got into the field.

My inspiration was basically the interactions I had with my young students and their definition of how they wanted to conduct their struggle. I didn't [grow] immediately from teacher at the university to full time women's activism; it was a gradual thing. At the beginning, I was doing both, but more and more it seemed to me that as much as I loved teaching, as much I enjoyed it, there was so much to do, so much to achieve and so much to accomplish, in real terms. In terms that affect individual women's lives at the grass roots level, that we all need to engage as much as we can in the struggle to help our young generation achieve more and more of their rights.

Thirty years or more after that, I'm still involved in the same struggle, with the same issues and challenges, somewhat different circumstances, but basically the same choices to be made. For instance, where we work with women in Muslim majority countries as well as other global south countries in Africa, Latin America, and central Asia, this is still a very significant part of the struggle for rights. How do you define rights in universal terms, [where] everyone wants all their rights? I don't believe what they've said about all rights depend on the context.

I have travelled the globe many times, spoken to all kinds of women from all kinds of backgrounds, [and] no one has ever said they don't want the right to work, or they don't want the right to make choices, or they don't want the right to make decisions, or they don't want to work or have the choice to work. Everyone wants all the rights that are universally accepted and supported. It's just that people want to have their own priorities. They want to have a say in how to implement these rights. How to strive for them and in what order? What comes first? What comes next? That is what my work has always involved. That is, how do you talk about universal rights? How do advocate for universal rights? How do you try to achieve those rights or aspire to them while bridging the context with the aspirations? How do you give people the choice to shape those rights and the struggles for those rights?

**HM: What was one of the first public things that you did?**

**MA:** The first serious public thing was [when] I went on the radio talking about equal pay for equal work for women in Iran. I must have been a bit shaky, and I must have been a bit unsure with that first experience. I was very young, twenty-seven years old. It was [a] national program, but I was proud to be able to do that and it was a good start for me. I got a lot of reaction that was positive and I got a lot of support.

**HM: What were the changes you wanted to see in Iran?**

**MA:** We wanted to move towards full equality, justice and full participation. I think—the aspirations are shared across the world.

**HM: When you went back to Iran, how was the political climate changing and how did it affect you?**

**MA:** The political climate was changing fast. There was modernization, which was happening in an accelerated fashion. A lot was happening that was positive. There was a lot of activism in different areas; there was a lot of creativity in cinema and in literature and others. Women were doing fantastic stuff. Economically, Iran was advancing very quickly [with a] huge growth potential. But the political component was not at all keeping up with the economic [one]. There was not this possibility of catching up into political engagement and political participation to match the changes that were happening in society. A large middle class was being created quickly. Large numbers of people were getting highly educated. Many of them were abroad. Expectations were high. But even though there were possibilities for people to take on projects, and it's a rich country with a lot of money coming from oil alone, let alone industries and other things, but there just wasn't a movement towards political participation as fast as was necessary to happen.

We were the first to experience political Islam in the way that it happened. Iran was the first to hear the 1984 language of using words with a different meaning. Mr. Khomeini talked about women being used as sexual objects. We thought, "Wow, wonderful. Who wants to have women used as sexual object?" But, what he meant was that women had to be covered from head to toe in black chador, otherwise they will be sexual objects. He talked about prostitution of women. Who wants prostitution of women? Of course he meant that any woman who is dressed like you and me is a prostitute by definition. If you're sitting with a man in the room, we are prostitutes.

So, this misuse of words worked very well during our time because it wasn't yet exposed for what it was. But then, after the shock of the establishment of Islam came about, women immediately realized. They had followed this revolution; they had tried to help it, in huge numbers and sacrificed. But before there was a constitution, before there was a government, even a temporary government, Mr. Khomeini nullified the laws that had been established for the improvement of women. That was his top priority and women were the first to come out and demonstrate against it.

In February, Mr. Khoemeni came to Iran. In February, he began dismantling the laws that protected women. In March, the women began demonstrating, they were the first. Later, of course, the others joined in, but for the men it took a much longer time to realize what it means to have a theocracy and what it means to have a religious dictatorship.

People have learned a lot from that and Muslim majority countries are very aware of the use of fundamentalist rhetoric of the cooptation of feminist terminology by fundamentalist actors to get support from women and progressive men. And they are much wiser now as a result of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

**HM: Can you describe specifically what was going on in Iran when you were teaching there? The history and the politics that were going on that would have made people react?**

**MA:** In Iran, in the seventies, there was a very active and a very strong women's movement, which had already been working for three quarters of a century, since the constitutional revolution of the early twentieth century. People were used to civic [and] mobile activism. They had already changed a whole lot of things such as family laws, acquired the right to vote, they [got involved] in the majlis, or parliament, and they were working in large numbers in various fields. So, they were wanting more as women [and] human beings. They wanted to achieve more than what they had. They were very eager to have more rights and at the same time they were connected to other women outside. There were, at that time, sixty thousand Iranian students studying in different countries and the United States. They were involved and connected. They knew what was possible and they wanted all that was possible. In that atmosphere, there was this whole underlying struggle between modernity and tradition and rights and religion.

**HM: Where were when you found out you couldn't go back to Iran?**

**MA:** I was in the United States, in New York, to negotiate a contract with the United Nations, to establish INSTRAW (United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women) in Iran.

I heard about it in the middle of the night [from] a phone call from my husband, saying that [the government] had told him that I better not come back because they [were] no longer in charge, and they did not feel they could protect me. As a matter of fact, not only could they not protect me, but they were actually putting people in prison who seemed to be unpopular with the Islamic revolution. And of course, a feminist and the former minister of women would be at the top of the list. In fact, later I became one of the first ten people who were called "Corrupt of the Earth" and "Warrior with God."

It was a very painful experience, to suddenly find yourself without a home, without your belongings, without your photographs, without your connections, your family, everything. It is one of the most devastating experiences that can happen. It is one thing to pack up, say good-bye

and choose another place to live. It is another to suddenly find you can't go back and it's a whole situation of who in heavens name am I?

**HM: So what does WLP, Women's Learning Partnership, do? Why is it important?**

**MA:** Women's Learning Partnership is important because of the way it originated, as a partnership. It's not an organization that was created and then found partners. It was created as a partnership, and that's an important distinction because whatever we have become and whatever we do is done collaboratively as a partnership. And so that's the basic significance of it, the new model of partnership that WLP offers. A partnership that includes independent, autonomous organizations across the global south and four continents, that work together and exchange experiences on an on going basis. [They] deeply respect one another's challenges and opportunities. And learn from each other. The very nature of partnership is one aspect of it.

The other is the collective decision that we want to have women in a position of power. We decided that unless we have power, we can't change things. And the power to do things together, the power to have choices, is a top priority. But it's not enough to have power, but how you gain that power and how you implement that power. That comes to the question of women's leadership, which is at the core of WLP work, but participatory, dialogical, communicative, horizontal, deeply respectful of each individual and that reflects itself in the process as well as in the end. That is our way of developing curriculum, which we have now in twenty languages. The curriculum is adapted to the cultural context of each community. It is scenario based so that people learn through narratives, sharing, collective discussion and dialogue. So, the process is as dialogical and as participatory as the end result of training that kind of leader. And that's why it's awfully flexible. It can be used as it has been used in ministries, such as the ministry of women's affairs in Afghanistan, in the Netherland and elsewhere. But, it can also be used at grassroots situation with some women who are not even literate. It [also] has been used for disabled people [such as] the blind.

**HM: Why is it important to have women leaders in our society?**

**MA:** Well, the simple reason is women are half the population, sometimes more, and we cannot really have democratic societies without half of the population. That's the obvious part of it, the human rights aspect of it. The other reason [is that] women, I think, because of the kind of experiences they have had historically, the kind of approaches they've had, the kind of responsibilities they've had traditionally, they seem to be more receptive to the kind of leadership that our world needs. They have had the tendency to be in communicative kinds of environments. They have experienced collective decision-making. They are particularly interested in participatory kind of dialogue and that's what they have been encouraging each other to do. [Since women] have been out of power, for most of history, once they [come together] in large numbers to be integrated in the policy making [power] structure, they will have had a chance to see what particular types of leadership have been exercised in the past, and how successful and unsuccessful they have been. So, the new wave has very much encouraged

women to rethink leadership and to think about the type of leadership that takes into account everyone's potential, resources, needs, challenges, talents and creativity.

This is the type of leadership, especially in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, [that] has been very much encouraged. And I think it's a very important thing, not just for women, but also for humanity, because that's how we want people to relate to each other. That's why it's so important to have women not just being in leadership positions, but exercising this kind of leadership, participatory, democratic, respectful of the other, and with a belief in everyone's potential.

**HM: Do women make different leaders than men?**

**MA:** Yes. They make different leaders because women have been paying particular attention to the field of leaders. They have been paying particular attention to having a different kind of leadership, to exercising a different kind of leadership. All of the organizations, individuals and groups who have been engaged in helping women to become participants in leadership have in fact encouraged a different kind of leadership than has been custom, the hierarchical, top-down kind of leadership. So, women have been trying to not only have more numbers, but also have different kind of leaders. And that's what's so important.

**HM: Do you think there is a need for more Muslim women religious leaders in Islam? Why? What difference would it make?**

**MA:** Well, it is more or less the same difference it would make to have women in any area of leadership, but possibly in the area of religion it is even more helpful than some because the misinterpretation of religion or misuse of religion has been very detrimental to people's lives. It is not the only way of changing laws or changing living conditions at all, [but] this is one component to a holistic approach to changing women's condition in Muslim majority countries.

One of the things I always have difficulty with is in the outside world. There is a perception of Muslim women and Muslims in general as if they are exceptional. They are different than other religions, [and] in some ways peculiar. The Abrahamic religions, whether it is Christianity, Judaism or Islam, come from a very small location in the Middle East. They are within sight of each other. The main holy texts are very similar. Both in the patriarchal bases for interpretation in earlier times and in ways that women have reinterpreted and have achieved better legal outcome and better equality of life. Of course, in Islam, like in all the other religions, people have all sorts of issues and challenges. It's not as if every Muslim gets up in the morning and says, "What does the holy text say about this or that?" They are concerned with other things like everybody else: jobs, arts, girlfriends or boyfriends, their family, education and everything else like everybody else. Muslim exceptionalism, part of which is Islamic Feminism, is really counter productive to understanding Muslim societies and to working for bettering societies, especially with regards to women.



**HM: Can you offer me one piece of advice as I go out in the world and achieve my goals?**

**MA:** I would say stay young. I don't mean in terms of age. I mean, curiosity, enthusiasm and the newness of it all. The feeling that you can change whatever you want to. The feeling that you can be who ever you want to be is a very youthful thing. [Therefore], stay young.