

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. First of all I would like to say it is an honor for me to be here.

Today I would like to talk about the situation of Iranian women. Women who were on their way towards equality to men. Women who were more competent, brilliant and advanced than ever.

After the revolution of '79, these women suddenly became inferior creatures. They account for half of Iran's population and are victimized by a religious regime.

Life of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran is imbued with discrimination, under the veil of Shariah law.

The hijab is mandatory. A woman is not allowed to work, study or travel without her husband's permission. A woman can't divorce, only on exceptional conditions. After a divorce, a woman can't get custody over her children, not even when her husband dies (then they are assigned to the father's family). Women inherit half of what men do and women's testimonies in court only have half the value of men's. According to the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is based on the Sharia, girls can be forced into a marriage from the age of 9. Girls are also considered criminally responsible at the age of 9, which is one of the reasons the Islamic Republic of Iran is the world's leading executioner of children.

And all this while individual and social liberties of Iranian society before the revolution had never been limited, making it difficult for women to accept these regulations now.

People sometimes point out to me that for Iranian women things must have changed for the better under President Rouhani.

That could not be less true!

Let me tell you something about some new limitations:

Under President Rouhani, in the past two years, the religious police opened more than 3 million files on women who do not live up to regulations regarding clothing. Between March and November 2015, more than 40,000 cars were confiscated because the female drivers or passengers didn't wear their Hijabs properly.

Universities have now introduced quotas to limit the amount of girls. Girls used to constitute 67% of all students, but now their enrollment is limited to 50%. And all of this while there are no limitations for men.

The situation regarding the employment of women isn't better either. In the past two years, under Rouhani, more than half a million female civil servants have lost their jobs, although national unemployment has declined. 37 years ago, before the revolution, the work participation rate for Iranian women was 13%. In that time Iran had the second highest participation rate for women in the region, Israel had the highest rate. But now women's participation in the labour market has dropped to 12%. And this while the

work participation rate in neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan are 16 and 24 %.

There are also new limitations regarding music concerts.

Female musicians, who had already been banned from singing, now even can't play an instrument anymore. Every concert with female musicians is getting cancelled.

The discrimination of Iranian women is also being carried forward into the sports arena. Women are being restricted in practicing sports, under the pretext of them having to wear bothersome clothing. As if this is not enough, female fans are being targeted as well. Some are even serving a jail sentence because they wanted to attend a game. To make it even worse, all this happens under the supervision of the international sports federations.

In other words, the situation is not improving! It is only getting worse!

Let me tell you about how Iranian women keep on fighting against these oppressions:

Exactly 37 years ago, tens of thousands of Iranian women marched in the streets of Tehran against the imminent obligation to wear a hijab and the Islamic laws. This mass demonstration on March 8, 1979, was the first direct confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Iranian women who realized that they would lose all their rights. Unfortunately, a fear proved justified.

In 1999, a student manifestation broke out against the regime. People were more than fed up with the blatant limitations of freedom and daily violations of human rights. These student manifestations resulted in a widely supported protest movement against the regime. We actively participated in these student protest. We constantly lived in fear and were permanently under observation, but still we cherished hope and believed that everything would change for the better eventually. However, the regime retaliated. And protests of course, did not go unanswered. Like myself, many people wound up in prison.

The 2009 Iranian presidential elections were followed by massive street demonstrations under the banner of the Green Movement. The Green Movement reached its height when up to 3 million peaceful demonstrators turned out on Tehran streets to protest against the dictatorial regime. These manifestations, which lasted for almost two years, were bloodily suppressed. Despite the peaceful nature of the protests, the police and the Basij (a paramilitary group) suppressed them by using batons, sticks and firearms. During these months a lot of people were killed on the streets. The most widely known victim was Neda, who's last moments were all over social media and broadcasted around the world. She was one of the many brave Iranian women who demonstrated in the streets against the daily violation of human rights by the regime and the lack of freedom.

Another example of resistance of Iranian women are the numbers of confiscated cars and files opened on women by the religious police because of 'bad Hijab'. These numbers clearly show that Iranian women don't want to live the way the government prescribes.

There's also been a lot of protest against the stadium ban. From the day the stadium ban was implemented, women have made numerous attempts to protest against it. In the Asian Volleyball Championship, which was held in October 2012 in Tehran, about a third of the spectators in the Azadi Stadium, with a current capacity of twelve thousand people, were women.

But now it has been three years that Iranian women do not even have the right to attend the national volleyball team competitions as spectators.

*Offside*, an Iranian film directed by Jafar Panahi, who has been banned from filmmaking, shows efforts against the stadium ban.

There have also been widely organized efforts against gender discrimination in sports outside Iran.

I founded the 'LET IRANIAN WOMEN ENTER THEIR STADIUMS CAMPAIGN'. I have also participated with my campaign in these efforts against the ban alongside some former Iranian and American female sport champions and other female activists from all around the world.

But we still observe that the government of Rouhani neglects the right of women to enter a stadium. During the FIVB World League games in Tehran in June 2015 they didn't sell tickets for women and security forces took up positions in a large area around the stadium, inspected approaching cars at checkpoints, and diverted women away, even when they were living close to the stadium. Only to prevent protests of women, who were denied access to the stadium despite earlier promises that they could attend these games.

Today, the sports arena has become a major place for women's civil campaigns. The Volleyball arenas are the front line of women's campaigns against gender discrimination.

All of this shows that Iranian women will keep on fighting against the discriminations and restrictions who are implemented by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Unfortunately, until today, any form of protest is still violently nipped in the bud by the regime. Iranian women need support from democratic countries and international organizations.

No society can develop as long as systematic discrimination of women as a rule rather than exception.

Regarding the problems of extreme Islamism the world is facing nowadays, it is even more important to support women who fight against this discrimination.

The fight for equal rights corrodes Islamism to the core of its existence and will

eventually overthrow it because equal rights for women are incompatible with an Islamic state structure.

A fight for women's rights is a fight against extremism, better and more efficient than any army.

I am confident that the fight for women's rights in Islamic countries and beyond can halt the lethal spiral of violence.

If women win, the whole society wins!