



Environmental Activism



Environmental activists are working on issues such as rampant water shortages, deforestation in the north of the country, pollution, wildlife preservation and natural habitat cleanup.

By Narges Bajoghli

The recent election of President Hassan Rouhani, who ran on the promise of offering greater space and protections to civil society, had energized the efforts of seasoned NGO activists and fresh university graduates eager to move ahead with their latest environmental efforts.

Gathered around a table in a Tehran office, they discussed how they could safeguard the jungle habitat of the endangered Persian leopard, around the Caspian Sea, Ems-News.com reported.

Their most recent project had expanded the Golestan National Park in the north of Iran to provide a refuge for the endangered leopards, and the activists were eager to extend their efforts to other regions of the country.

The civic energy of former President Mohammad Khatami's years was palpable in the room, but the activists now had the added experience of how to survive under extremely inhospitable conditions, and continue to thrive, un-noticed.

Environmental NGOs
For those activists who stayed in Iran during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency and continued to work on social issues, many shifted their focus to the environment.

Most of the activists I spoke to for this piece asked not to be named due to the lingering sensitivity around their work, and they are quoted by first name pseudonyms. For those who chose to be named, their names appear in full.

After Ahmadinejad's election, many civil society organizations shut down after the president enacted restrictions. However, environmental NGOs were not affected as harshly as organizations that deal with human issues.

Although Ahmadinejad's administration cut formal support for environmental NGOs, activists continued working on issues such as rampant water shortages, deforestation in the north of the country, pollution, wildlife preservation and natural habitat cleanup.

Shirin, a 25-year-old who recently returned to Iran after earning a Master's in environmental science in Europe, began working for an organization that focused on the protection of wildlife.

The organization's staff works tirelessly from morning until late at night, planning projects and activities to raise

awareness about the dire conditions of wildlife in the country.

Her NGO works to protect endangered animals, including the Persian leopard, *Panthera pardus ciscaucasica*, the largest leopard subspecies in the world.

This leopard is native to northern Iran, the Caucasus Mountains, eastern Turkey and southern Turkmenistan.

The Persian leopard, much like the endangered Baluchistan bear in Iran and Pakistan, is threatened by poaching and loss of habitat due to deforestation and infrastructure development.

Her organization works to raise awareness about these animals and expand protected zones.

Leyla, Shirin's co-worker, adds, "There's very little public knowledge in Iran about the dire circumstances of endangered wildlife animals.

Environmental issues as a whole are not given much importance here, and since Iran has been shut off from the international community, we have no international support for our work."

She looks at her colleagues, smiles and shrugs it off. "It's okay though, we'll keep working on this and eventually people will start paying attention."

Public Relations Problem
Activists complain that there is little public awareness about the environmental issues the country faces. With the independent press also suffering from increased censorship during the Ahmadinejad years, publishing news about environmental issues became increasingly difficult.

Mehdi Chalani, an environmental scientist turned documentary filmmaker, decided to pick up a camera and bring environmental stories to life.

Chalani taught himself filmmaking, and with a small budget, set out to create films about the endangered Baluchistan bear and the Persian leopard.

"I got tired of doing the research and having it fall on deaf ears. I thought that at least with films, I could try to show people in the cities what was going on in far off places," he said, on a return



trip to Tehran.

Chalani was off in a few weeks to Baluchistan for a six-month stint to film a new story about oil trafficking and the hunting of black Asian bears. Despite his efforts, he has not been able to screen his films on Iranian state television.

The widespread problem of pollution in Iran's major cities has been one of the only environmental issues addressed in the press.

"We either have to focus on the fact that pollution is suffocating our large cities, or we have to figure out a way to connect the issues we work on to something surrounding national and historical interest. Otherwise, people won't care,"

says Kamran, the head of Public Relations Department at one of the environmental organizations.

"People care when they hear that the construction of a subway system in Isfahan may potentially endanger historical sites, or that the great salt Lake Urmieh is drying in northern Iran. But other than that, they don't care about what's going on to the environment," said Kamran. "We have a public relations problem when it comes to our environmental issues."

Precedent

Environmental activism began in the 1970s in Iran, when figures such as Iskandar Firouz headed the Environmental Protection Society of Iran.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the 1980-88 Iraq-imposed war, however, President Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97) led an era of reconstruction, encouraging growth and the creation of factories and manufacturing plants all over the country, often without any consideration for their environmental impact. An environmental crisis began to form in Iran.

Activists trace the root of the crises they work on today to the post-war policies of the Rafsanjani era: haphazard dam-building throughout the country, mining, factories destroying air quality, and the destruction of jungles in the north of the country to manufacture pa-

per, among other products.

After the war, social organizations began to reemerge, breathing new life into civic engagement in the country. Mahlaqa Mallah created the Women's Society Against Environmental Pollution, followed by mountain climbing groups at the universities in big cities such as Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz.

But, it wasn't until the election of the reformist president, Khatami, in 1997 that Iranians became active on a large scale and environmental activism took on renewed importance.

Ali, a veteran NGO activist, recalls how large groups of students would gather at the universities to travel to northern provinces of Iran to pick up trash and raise awareness about environmental damage.

"The more we got out of the major cities and traveled together in large groups to the provinces, the more we all became aware of the huge environmental damage taking place in the name of industrialization," he said.

Although environmental activists are encouraged by the election of Hassan Rouhani as the new president, they remain wary about the future.

"Anything is better than Ahmadinejad," says Hamid. "We were completely suffocated under him and barely survived."

In a positive turn of events, the US Treasury Department announced last month that it was issuing a general license to support humanitarian aid in Iran, which includes environmental and wildlife conservation efforts.

"We hope Rouhani makes things bet-

ter," Hamid says. Although Rouhani has indicated that he will ease restrictions on civil society in Iran, the activists who have worked on environmental issues in the last decade are determined to stay in this field.

"There's just too much to be done and the environmental crisis in Iran is growing by the day," says Ali.

In a common refrain by the young generation of environmental activists in Iran, Shirin says, "Yes, I'm happy Rouhani is now the president, but I'm so cynical. I'd rather pour all my energy in conserving the environment in this country."

(Narges Bajoghli is a PhD student in anthropology at New York University and director of the documentary film, "The Skin That Burns" (2012), about survivors of chemical warfare in Iran.)

Women in the World

Migrant Women Workers Facing Many Challenges in US

Adareli Ponce is a typical working woman in America, but her work experience is not typically "American". Even though the products of the labor of women like her are everywhere, her story is invisible to many.

As the main provider for her family back in Hidalgo, Mexico, the 31-year-old has spent years slogging away in US chocolate and seafood processing facilities, In These Times reported.



Migration was her chance to escape the entrenched poverty that ensnares so many young women in her hometown, who she says are often excluded from sustainable job opportunities. But the journey has been fraught with hardship and loneliness.

This week, she and a number of other women who have worked in the US on "guestworker" visas went to Washington, DC with the bi-national labor advocacy group Centro de los Derechos del Migrante to testify about migrant women's struggles.

Because most migrant workers are men, Ponce said in her public testimony, "migrant women are commonly excluded and made invisible in debates about immigration".

But they make up as much as 44 percent of the low-wage labor force, according to some estimates, and they face gender-specific problems ranging from sexual harassment on the job to the challenges of trans-border motherhood.

If migrant women are missing from the immigration debate, they are also excluded from conversations about US women in the workforce, which tend to dwell on white-collar problems like the gender pay gap and the corporate "glass ceiling".

"Migrant women face much more basic problems: how to stave off sexual abuse and cope with long-term separation from their children, which compound issues common to migrants of all genders, like crushing poverty or heat exhaustion and toxic fumes in farm fields."

Ironically, migrant women workers have propelled opportunities for middle-class Americans. Moms who work outside of the home can better achieve work/life balance thanks to options like a migrant nanny at home or frozen seafood dimers processed by the industries fueled by migrant women's labor.

Facing double discrimination as immigrants and women, female guestworkers like Ponce risk being tracked into especially low-paid, exploitative jobs.

In this racket, everyone else gets a cut: international labor recruiters who act as shady brokers of coveted visa jobs; US employers who bring in these workers to serve as cheap, "disposable" labor, and big corporations like Walmart that earn fat profits at the expense of underpaid migrants in subcontracted supply chains.

Indigenous Australian Women In Poverty

A 10-year study has found Australia's most disadvantaged are more likely to be women, indigenous and have health problems.

To coincide with national poverty week, researchers at the University of Canberra have released a study that tracked 900 people for a decade, who were identified as marginalized in 2001. abc.net.au reported.

The study found 60 percent of those identified by the study as marginalized in 2001 had escaped those conditions by 2010.

But Professor Helen Berry says 40 percent remain disadvantaged.

"That's an awfully long time to be marginalized and be living in those circumstances," she said.

It was found they mostly moved out of home at a young age, left school early or experienced parental unemployment or divorce.



She found those who escaped either found a full-time job, could stay home until at least 18, did not leave school early and for women did not have further children.

But Professor Berry found getting minor qualifications or a part-time job did not improve things.

"Obtaining a full-time job was great but interestingly obtaining a part-time job didn't improve circumstances," she said.

Those who remained disadvantaged were more likely to be Indigenous, women or have chronic health problems.

The national Rural Health Alliance and the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) say people living in poverty in regional areas face greater disadvantage than their city counterparts.

The two organizations are today releasing a snapshot of poverty outside Australia's major cities.

ACOSS Deputy Chief Executive Dr Tessa Boyd-Caine says people worst affected are low-income families, single parents and people on disability pensions.

"People on the lowest level of income support relying on that income support to help themselves and their families are doing it particularly tough, with less access to jobs and with less access to the supports and services that they need in those tough times," she said.

Both groups say the gap between the haves and have-nots is increasing in both urban and rural areas, with more work needed on education, employment, housing and transport.

Foods Heated in Plastic Increase Miscarriage Risk

Pregnant women have been urged to avoid food and drinks heated in plastic containers after a study found certain chemicals can increase the risk of miscarriage by 80 percent.

Pregnant women have been warned to avoid canned foods, microwaved food and plastic water bottles left out in the sun after a study found certain chemicals can increase the risk of miscarriage by 80 percent, Guardian reported.

Research on animals has previously suggested that the chemical bisphenol-A (BPA) could threaten fetal survival but until now there have been limited studies on humans.

The new findings from Stanford University, presented at the American Society for Reproductive Medicine's annual conference in Boston, suggest that high levels of contact with the chemical found in many plastics could dramatically increase the likelihood of miscarriage.

The scientists behind the study said that it was impossible to avoid all contact with the substance, which is used in plastic packaging, tinned products and cash register receipts, but recommending limiting the impact of exposure.

Ten Worst Countries for Child Labor

Where in the world are children toiling in dangerous and dirty conditions, missing out on education and other basic rights?

A new report by risk analysis firm Maplecroft, which ranks 197 countries, identifies Eritrea, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Zimbabwe and Yemen as the 10 places where child labor is most prevalent, CNN wrote.

Countries with high poverty rates fare badly in the index due to the need for children to supplement their family income, the report said, but economically important countries like China, India, Russia and Brazil were also found to have extreme risks because child labor laws are often poorly enforced.

Trafficking of children into forced labor or sexual exploitation remains a big problem, the report added.

Despite its fast-growing economy, China has witnessed a substantial increase in child labor risks over the past year, ranking 20th compared with 53rd a year earlier.