Iranian Women's rights activist Shadi Sadr receives Dutch Tulip Award today
Marcel van der Heijden
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Shadi Sadr
Today, Shadi Sadr, founder and director of the Iranian legal aid centre *Raahi* (on the road) in Tehran, has been awarded the prestigious Dutch Human Rights Tulip Award. Hivos has cooperated with *Raahi* and Shadi Sadr from 2004 until 2007, when *Raahi* had to close its doors in a wave of repression against civil society activists who had contacts with 'the West'. Shadi Sadr was repeatedly arrested and extensively interrogated about her role as human rights defender/women's rights activist and about the funding of her work by European NGOs. This funding was received with explicit approval of the Iranian authorities of that time. However, in the political climate under president Mahmud Ahmadinejad (since 2005), civil society activists with support from Western NGOs were portrayed as puppets of the alleged Western political agenda of regime change.

Shadi Sadr (1974) is a well-known court lawyer, journalist and women's rights activist. In her impressive career, she has been working on a range of issues, which are all related to women's rights. This includes violence against women, legal changes in favour of women, stoning, and women in prisons. In *Raahi* legal aid centre, Shadi Sadr and a dozen of fellow counselors provided free legal advice to women on issues such as divorce, custody and inheritance. As a defense lawyer, Shadi Sadr also defended women and activists in court. Besides founding and leading *Raahi*, Shadi Sadr also started the Stop Stoning Campaign, together with other women's rights activists. Also, she stood at the cradle of the Volunteer Lawyers Network, with dozens of lawyers in different parts of Iran. In addition, Shadi Sadr has co-founded *Zanan-e Iran* (Women of Iran) website, a network to share information among women's rights activists throughout Iran.

Women in Iran
Although the Constitution of the Islamic Republic includes the principle of equality (according to Islamic criteria) and Iran is party to the main international human rights instruments (but not the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women - CEDAW), power relations between men and women are unequal, and women have a subordinate position in society *de jure* and *de facto*. State policies are generally in favour of men and negative for women, which shows in court representation, custody over children, inheritance issues, sexual and reproductive rights, etc. In fact, the inequality between men and women is omnipresent in all aspects of life, including the public space. The Islamic laws bar many women from significant economic and political functions. Although women are the majority of citizens and are generally well educated, they are underrepresented in governing bodies.

Significant problems for women in Iran are violence against women, in particular domestic violence, and trafficking. Iran is a source, transit, and destination country for women trafficked for sexual exploitation and involuntary servitude. In addition, stoning to death for 'moral corruption' is regularly applied in public, and more women than men are stoned to death. Also honour killings and female genital mutilation take place and are hardly punished.

Women in prison after protest
The 2009 presidential elections were not free and fair, but blurred by political games and violence. President Ahmadinejad claimed the victory right after election day, but his rival candidates challenged this and claimed that there had been fraud. This caused new massive street protests, by men and women. The protests were oppressed with a lot of violence by the police, the Revolutionary Guards and vigilant armed militia. Thousands of protestors were arrested en several were killed. Most protestors have been released since then, but 140 of them (mostly human rights defenders, politicians, journalists and bloggers) have been put on trial for treason and for allegedly conspiring with foreign powers to organize unrest.

The conditions in which these detainees are being held are appalling. Ill-treatment, torture and rapes have been reported and at least three detainees died in custody. Women are more likely to be victim of sexual abuse than men. Reports of rape and sexual torture of women political prisoners particularly came from Kahrizak prison. Shadi Sadr claims that "*in the past two months and for the first time in thirty years, the issue of sexual abuse in prison has been made so obvious that it puts the legitimacy of the Iranian government and its ideological religious laws in question*" (Shadi Sadr, October 2009).

However, sexual abuse of politically active women is not a new phenomenon. Ever since the 1979 Revolution, women political prisoners have been subject to both mental torture and sexual and physical torture. Most female political prisoners claim they have experienced sexual torture. Sexual torture and rape have been used as way to obtain confessions and to punish people for dissenting opinions and life styles, as well as to harm the personal identity of women and their relatives. Shadi Sadr states: "*Is it possible to consider the sexual abuse and torture of women over the past 30 years as a true crime against humanity? If the answer to this question is yes, as I believe it to be, then victims could gain access to international judicial mechanisms to achieve justice*".

Human Rights and death penalty

Iran has a bad human rights record. A wide range of human rights and fundamental freedoms are violated by governmental and semi-governmental forces. This affects critical civil society activists, trade unionists, journalists, scholars, students and politicians. A particular concern is the death penalty. Iran ranks second on the world list of executions, after China. There are hundreds of executions per year, adding up to thousands since the 1979 Revolution. Iran has the highest number of executions of juveniles (persons under 18 at the time of the crime).

Death by stoning was prohibited in the 2000s and since 2008 Iran has a moratorium on public executions, but many executions still take place in public, mostly by hanging and stoning. Stoning is applied much more to women than to men. For that reason, Shadi Sadr calls death by stoning "*a women's affair*" in Iran. Photos and films of such public executions, often taken illegally with cell phones and disseminated via the Internet, continue to shock the rest of the world.

Recognition

Shadi Sadr receives international recognition for her work. Besides the Dutch Human Rights Tulip Award, she won the Polish Lech Walesa Award in 2009, shared with Ladan and Roya Boromand. In 2004 she received the Ida B. Wells Award for Bravery in Journalism.

Hivos considers the Human Rights Tulip Award a recognition of Shadi Sadr's exceptional courage. It will support her in her work and contribute to her personal safety. But Shadi Sadr is not alone in this difficult strive. The granting of the Human Rights Tulip Award to an Iranian women's rights defender may also be seen as a recognition and support for the struggle of all men and women in Iran fighting for equal rights. Hivos hopes that all oppressed and marginalized women worldwide take heart from the granting of this prestigious award to Shadi Sadr and continue fighting for equal rights.

The documentary film 'Women in Shroud', in which Shadi Sadr and other Iranian lawyers are followed in defending court cases, will be shown at the IDFA documentary festival (November 2009) and the Movies That Matter film festival (March 2010), an initiative of Amnesty International.