

On a blustery afternoon in New York City on September 27, 2015, all 193 United Nations Member States met in the General Assembly and agreed to the historic 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (ASD)

This charter provided “a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.” and was organized into 17 Sustainable Development Goals which established benchmarks for all countries across a wide variety of issues. Amongst these, the fifth goal called for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment all women and girls. While all nations are in need of progress on this topic, Iran stands out for its barbaric abuses and lack of advancement. Although Iran signed on to ASD, judging by documented rights violations across many of the ASD goals, women will continue to greatly suffer without international intervention. The willingness of the newly elected Biden Administration to re-engage Iran in talks to end devastating economic sanctions presents a unique opportunity to incent the Islamic nation to comply with the targets outline in ASD. Through economic incentives tied to key women’s rights indicators the U.S. and the international community can make solid progress towards the 2030 goals.

Iran has a tumultuous record regarding women’s equality. Even though overall human rights were restricted under the Phalavi monarchy for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women actually saw significant progress. Until a revolution in 1979, women saw advancements in education, employment, and political participation, such as the 1935 enrollment of the first group of women at Tehran University, the right to vote in 1963 and the 1968 appointment of the first female Minister of Education. But the 1979 Islamic Revolution led to

major setbacks in women's equality and ushered in injustices in many areas. In the legal arena, the constitution and penal code value the life of a woman as half that of a man. In tort cases, women are awarded 50 percent of what a man would receive and female testimony in court is legally viewed with less credibility as she is only "worth" half of a man. Wives can legally be deprived of shelter, food, and clothes if they don't meet the sexual needs of their husband, and if they are even suspected of dishonoring their family they can be beaten or killed by a male family member. Political and economic equality is also greatly lacking. Only 15% of Iranian women are employed and they account for a mere 6% of Iran's legislative body. And recently, when women's rights defenders campaigned against discriminatory forced veiling laws, many were sentenced to prison and flogging for "inciting and facilitating corruption and prostitution" through promoting "unveiling".

The fifth goal of the ASD, achievement of gender equality and empowerment all women and girls, includes 9 measurable goals by which compliance can be measured but with such a fundamental lack of progress on basic issues, Iran should concentrate of a few core objectives first, including:

- The elimination of all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres.
- The elimination of all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage.
- Full and elective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

- Reforms giving women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.

With its history of internal suppression against reform efforts it is essential that the international community exerts pressure to motivate change, and the United State currently has an opportunity to make a huge difference. In response to Iran's nuclear weapon ambitions and human rights record, President Trump greatly increased economic sanctions in 2018 and the results were profound. As a direct result of the sanctions, Iran's gross domestic product shrank by nearly 10% in 2019, and unemployment rose to nearly 17%. Due to strong trade restrictions, Iran's main source of income, oil exportation, in 2019 plummeted to only 16% of its 2010 level. Iranian currency has lost 50% of its value and inflation has hit nearly 37%. In February the Biden Administration formally offered to resume talks about Iran's nuclear program but the country has refused to do so unless the sanctions are lifted first. This impasse presents a great opportunity to offer a compromise by including progress on women's rights goals as a means to begin to lift sanctions. Minority Rights Group International, an organization dedicated to the pursuit of equal rights around the globe, has outlined some key objectives for Iran that should be tied to the lifting of sanctions. They call for:

- The elimination of criminal provisions which discriminate between men and women or provide exemptions for crimes committed by men, including physical and sexual violence.
- The immediate release of all prisoners detained solely for peacefully protesting and advocating for women's human rights.

- Improved gender balance in the distribution of civil service posts, ministerial portfolios and other high-ranking political positions, as well as increased access to all employment opportunities.

Total compliance with these objectives is likely too lofty of a goal but a practical approach of marginal, measurable improvement in each area leading to commensurate reduction in sanctions is achievable. Because Iran's economic woes are profound and threaten to destabilize the government the United States has significant leverage to influence reform.

As we progress further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women's equality should be a foregone conclusion, but unfortunately it is not. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has outlined measurable goals to advance equality and Iran has committed to compliance. But with history as a predictor of the future, they will need a push in the right direction to motivate real change. The new Biden Administration has a profound prospect to motivate Iran through the removal of sanctions based on women's rights progress. Let's use this opportunity give the women of Iran the dignity and respect they deserve.

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