

# Resistance, Resilience and the Role of Narrative: Lessons from the Experiences of Iranian Bahá'í Women Prisoners

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## Abstract

*This paper is a study of Iranian Bahá'í women who experienced imprisonment in the Islamic Republic of Iran following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Aspects of individual resistance and resilience are explored through life history interviews. Through the examination of those histories I was better able to understand and explore the narratives the research participants provided. The intersections between the principles of the Bahá'í Faith and the way they have been enacted in the context of Iran in that period provided the broader picture within which the narratives are set.*

## Introduction

The land of my birth, Iran, continues to be both inaccessible mystery to me and a source of inspiration and hope. In 1986, when I was a small child, my family was forced into exile. My research which is the subject of this paper has been inspired by the legacy of my great-grandmother, Sarvar Mehrani- at the age of 16, armed guards entered her home at night and slaughtered her husband—whom they accused of being a dissident. Several decades later, together with her second husband, Fariborz Roozbehyan, Sarvar hosted an American doctor, Susan Moody. Dr Moody set up one of the earliest gynaecological clinics in Tehran. Sarvar's later work as a self-described feminist focused on the social and material status of Iranian women. The lives of Sarvar, Fariborz and Dr. Moody demonstrate the difficult position women in Iran often face, and highlight the need to explore issues related to gender equality.

In the case of Iran in particular, the situation of women in general cannot be fairly addressed without due acknowledgment of the long history of vibrant contributions made by Iranian women in a vast range of social endeavours, such as human rights and law, education, medicine and public health, arts, literature and many others. The sudden and dramatic changes in policies introduced by the Islamic government following the 1979 Iranian revolution

made the continuation of women's involvement in society difficult from both a legal and social perspective.

The aim of this paper will be to explore issues relating to both gender equality and the persecution of Iranian women from a feminist perspective; the experiences of women political/religious prisoners in Iran will help to facilitate this discussion. Data was drawn from an analysis of written memoirs, as well as three life history interviews with former female prisoners. As a group, these women represent a category of imprisoned women in modern Iran, with an important factor determining their dilemma: despite various accusations, it was their adherence to Bahá'í teachings that ultimately led to their persecution. Using both the published memoirs and the life history interviews, I will explore the ways in which Bahá'í women negotiated their gender and faith identity, and discuss the crucial importance of narrative in this context.

## **History and Context – Women and the Bahá'í Faith**

The Bahá'í faith- a minority religion in Iran whose members have frequently faced persecution from the Iranian government- is of central importance to the paper and relates specifically to the exploration of gender equality of men and women in Iran. Gender equality is a central tenant of the Bahá'í religion, and part of the reason that Bahá'ís have faced problems from a patriarchal and misogynistic administration. It is therefore necessary to explore the Bahá'í principles pertaining to the equality of women and men. This was a rich avenue of approach for this particular project and this subject later became a necessary part of the theoretical foundation for the research. The concept of the equality of men and women, and how this principle has been enacted in Bahá'í history, provides a background for the actions of the women in this study. The notion of gender equality is both a belief and practice too rarely exemplified in the world today.

The Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the world's independent religions (Hatcher and Martin, 1998, p. xiii), and is based on written volumes of teachings by its twin founders, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. It originated in Iran, in the mid nineteenth century. The central purpose of the Faith is the unification of humanity. Bahá'í precepts outline the gradual evolution and development of human society towards collective justice, peace, and unity (Esslemont, 1980, p. 121-123). A critical element of the message of both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh is the important role of women in society and the equality of women and men. This stands in stark contrast to the status of women under the leadership of the Iranian government in this period. The inclusion of women in the Bahá'í Faith was far more than symbolic, and was part of the

early teachings of the religion. The son of the Prophet founder of the Bahá'í Faith `Abdu'l-Bahá states the following:

*'When all mankind shall receive **the same opportunity of education** and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed. Without equality this will be impossible because all differences and distinction are conducive to discord and strife'*

(`Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982, p. 175, emphasis added).

The highest administrative body of the Bahá'í Faith, The Universal House of Justice, echoes this message: 'Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge' (The Universal House of Justice, 1985).

## Historical Exemplars of the Principle

Among the numerous historically significant women in Bábí-Bahá'í history, Bahíyyih Khánum and Táhirih were women looked to by the interview participants in this research as models of gender equality and inspiration during their imprisonment and persecution. Their lives provide an appropriate foundation for the concept of important leaders to whom the women of this research attribute, in large measure, their own resilience.

Bahíyyih Khánum was the daughter of the Prophet Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, and was given the title The Greatest Holy Leaf by Bahá'u'lláh. Born in Tehran in 1846 (Bramson, 2004, p. 102), she was a unique figure who held positions of high authority, but was also noted for her 'nurturance, trust and encouragement.' (Khan, 2005, p. 286). Bahíyyih Khánum played a critical role as acting head of the Bahá'í Faith in the early history of this religion (Bramson, 2004, p. 102). She was looked to with respect and dignity, and was often directly involved with the protection and promulgation of Bahá'u'lláh's message throughout her life. Janet Khan has written extensively on her life in the book Prophet's Daughter: The Life and Legacy of Bahíyyih Khánum, outstanding heroine of the Bahá'í Faith (Khan, 2005). She describes Bahíyyih Khánum:

*'...the ideals and values she manifested have continuing relevance to contemporary society. Her confident and resilient response to suffering and hardship, her acceptance of administrative responsibility and exemplary leadership behavior, and her capacity to deal*

*constructively with change are not only worthy of emulation, but are skills critical to influencing the direction of social evolution'*

(Khan, 2005, p. 299).

Bahíyyih Khánum was eventually appointed to the "headship" of the Bahá'í Faith following `Abdu'l-Bahá's passing in 1921. Janet Khan expounds on this subject, 'Bahíyyih Khánum's appointment to the "headship" of the Bahá'í Faith, though intended as an interim arrangement, clearly was not constructed as a mere ceremonial position. The mandate was all-encompassing -- including the direction of "the affairs of the Cause both at home and abroad" -- and specified for the Greatest Holy Leaf the primary position within the holy family. Furthermore, it is significant to note that the mandate was not confined to the internal operation of the Bahá'í community but it also extended to the conduct of business with the world at large' (Khan, 2005, 132).

Bahíyyih Khánum left a number of detailed memoirs in which she narrates her life experiences. Her narratives provide a clear window into her time with Bahá'u'lláh. She included recollections of her travels through several nations in exile with her parents, brothers and other members of the family.

These ideals of the early message and example of the Bahá'í Faith became a tangible reality as a group of early American nurses and doctors traveled to Tehran to set up a wide range of educational and medical institutions. The Tarbiyat School for girls was established in 1911, and many thousands of Iranian girls were enrolled, whether the children themselves were Bahá'ís or not. Many of these early Western Bahá'ís, alongside Bahá'ís of Iranian background pursued the establishment of these institutions. In fact, in the person of Dr. Susan Moody and a group of nurses with whom she worked, they also provided access to modern gynecological treatment that was previously unavailable to that population (Armstrong- Ingram, 1986, p. 19).

A second heroine whose life is often used as an important narrative from Bábí- Bahá'í history, was born Fátimih Baraghání in the city of Qazvin in 1817 (Milani, 1992, p.82). Táhirih was first given the title Qurratu'l-`Ayn (Solace of the Eyes) by the second Shaykhi leader, Sayyid Kázim of Rasht and later the name of Táhirih by Bahá'u'lláh ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1915, p. 192). She is known to history for her literary gifts as both poet and theologian. In Bábí history she played a unique role as one of the first eighteen disciples of the Báb, in the summer of 1844. The early disciples were collectively known as The Letters

of the Living (Momen, 2000, p. 190). The Cambridge historian E.G. Browne (2004) writes of Táhirih:

*'Alike in virtue of her marvellous beauty, her rare intellectual gifts, her fervid eloquence, her fearless devotion, and her glorious martyrdom, she stands forth incomparable and immortal amidst her countrywomen. Had the Bábí religion no other claim to greatness, this were sufficient—that it produced a heroine like Kurratu'l-'Ayn'*

(Browne, 2004, p. 85).

As Táhirih's devotion to the Bábí religion deepened, so did the opposition that she faced, an antagonism which originated in both her family and in the Qájár leadership of Iran. Her persecution was of particular importance to the women that I interviewed. They consistently remarked that the challenges and suffering of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and followers such as Táhirih, were far greater than what they had endured. They said that this example inspired them to remain strong while in prison.

The moment when Táhirih publicly removed her veil at the garden conference of Badasht, in the presence of Bahá'u'lláh, is an event of great significance from a feminist perspective. Táhirih coupled this action with a stirring declaration of the importance of the time in which they lived. She said, 'This is the day of festivity and universal rejoicing, the day on which the fetters of the past are burst asunder.' (Balyuzi, 1980, p. 45). This bold statement is a call for a feminist awakening and the eventual emancipation of women in Iran. Amanat (2004) writes:

*'Qurrat al-'Ayn's religious convictions were almost inseparable from her feminine consciousness. The only solution she saw, for women and men alike, was a break with the past...'*

(Amanat, 2004, p. 145).

The ideology Táhirih espoused was used later to criticize the Bábí religion. Tavakoli-Targhi (2007) notes:

*'The active role of Qurrat al'Ayn in the Babi movement was assumed to have been a sign of the immorality of the Babis.'*

(Tavakoli-Targhi, 2007, p. 203).

Whatever the controversy surrounding her presence, Táhirih continued to write and promote her message of gender equality. In August of 1852,

following a previous sentence of house arrest, Táhiriḥ was sentenced to death. Her own veil was used to strangle her in the garden of Ilkhani in Tehran (Maneck, 1994, p. 3). Just before she was killed, she is recorded to have said, 'You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.' (Maneck, 1994, p. 3).

Future historians will no doubt also explore the lives of the many other dynamic Bahá'í women. Individuals such as May and Mary Maxwell, Martha Root, and countless others arose to promote the message of equality and were at the forefront of the unfoldment of this Faith. The Bahá'í writings constitute an extensive body of literature outlining and insisting upon the equal status of women. Both Bahá'u'lláh and his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá professed strong views on issues in this regard. They include the fundamental importance of education for young girls, the equal spiritual status of women and men, and the importance of women's development and advancement in all areas of human endeavour, without exception.

## **The Value of Retelling: Survival and Resistance Through Words**

This study premises a large portion of its findings upon both published memoirs of Bahá'í women, as well as life history interviews with three Iranian women who had been imprisoned for their beliefs in modern Iran. When I began this research, I was curious to learn the ways in which Bahá'í women exhibited resistance during and following their imprisonment in Iran. I used the prison experience of Iranian Bahá'í women as a framework in which to study both resistance and resilience. In looking at this question, I was fortunate to find the recently published book of memoirs, *We Lived to Tell: Political Prison Memoirs of Iranian Women* (Agah, Mehr and Parsi, 2007). In addition I was able to find *Olya's Story* (1993), in which Olya Roohizadegan, presented her own experience and that of a number of other Bahá'í women who were imprisoned in Shíráz in 1983. These written memoirs also served as data alongside the life history interviews. The political, social, and historical particularities of the context of these women's experience, Iran and prison, are important factors in their narratives.

The resistance of the women studied here are characterized by the will to act against the imposed policies and practices of the social order. The motivation behind their will and determination to remain firm under the most difficult conditions was their religious and spiritual convictions. The fact that these women continued to hold fast to their beliefs in prison may be seen, in and of itself, as a form of resistance. This resistance did not end upon their release from prison. The present study looks most closely at the narratives

provided in published memoirs as well as the life histories of three Iranian Bahá'í women, all of whom were imprisoned at some point in the past thirty years. The Bahá'í women interviewed for this research were deliberately separated from other Bahá'ís, unlike those in the published memoirs.

## **Life History Interviews**

The theory supporting life history narration proposes that the nature of retelling, particularly the retelling of traumatic experiences, is important in raising the consciousness of society surrounding injustice. Similarly, life histories are significant as an effective way to elicit the compassion and action of those who hear the story. Moreover, the retelling of one's story can serve as a key step in the healing of the individual who has experienced trauma. Thus the method of life history interviews is significant for the individuals who retell their experience, for those who hear the retelling, and eventually for the larger society which receives this testimony. Through a process of individual and collective transformation, each of the women displayed resistance in opposition to the injustice of their imprisonment. This resistance resulted from mental engagement with, and physical demonstration of, their beliefs. After they were released from prison, the process of retelling their stories, and activism related to what had befallen them, became another form of resistance.

Each woman was interviewed for between four to ten hours and her story recorded. The interviews were conducted in both Persian and English. I then translated and transcribed the text of the interviews. I began each interview session with a quote from the recently published book of memoirs, *We Lived to Tell: Political Prison Memoirs of Iranian Women* (Agah, Mehr and Parsi, 2007):

*'Life in Evin wasn't all ugliness, mind you. It also included friendships so beautiful and pure that they were enough to keep you going amidst the utmost inhumanity. Sacrificing a piece of bread, giving up sleeping space to a sick friend and sitting up all night to watch over her, sharing clothes, washing the clothes of a cellmate with tortured feet who couldn't walk, massaging someone's bruised feet, listening to a mother incessantly talk about the child from whom she'd been separated, carving a stone for a friend's birthday- there were times when we could easily forget where we were, when we could laugh and tell jokes, sing, or make up plays and then act them out. We could imagine families for ourselves, have mothers and sisters who were*

*not our own, fall in love and create bonds so tight that years and death could not cut or damage them. Among these lessons I learned during my five years in Evin, this was the only one that was beautiful. In prison, I made the best friends of my life, and not only that, met the best people I could ever imagine. I also met the worst people of my life in Evin, but no one said it was going to be all roses. If true friendship is what I got out of those five years, I believe it's a good price for my youth, my health, and for growing old too soon'*

(Agah, Mehr & Parsi, 2007, p. 164).

Reading this passage from *We Lived to Tell* (2007) helped to introduce my research to the research participants and indicate the diverse means of retelling one's life story. Parsi's words help us to establish a level of comfort with the reality of women's life in prison, sharing openly the intimate details of her experience. We then discussed the manner in which they would feel most comfortable in telling their own stories.

The interviews took place in three locations. One chose to be interviewed in her home. The second chose a university office, and the third on the telephone. While each setting was conducive to an honest and private talk, the home was the most beneficial for this type of interview, as it was possible for the participant to show me important documents and photographs. The home setting was also the most private of the three locations. The presence of a digital audio recorder did not intrude, but it was made clear to each interviewee when they were being recorded.

## **The Role of Memoirs**

The theory surrounding the importance of memoirs can be found in the fields of both psychology and literature. Helen M. Buss (2002) writes, 'In historical narratives, only public events happen. In traditional fiction, such public events act as a background for the personal story. In memoir, real lives happen in all their daily richness in parallel and in connection with public life' (Buss, 2002, p. 128). Elie Wiesel, the famous Holocaust historian, notes that this generation can be noted for the creation of a 'new literature,' namely testimony (Buss, 2002, p. 121). One element that gives this genre social and academic significance is the potential of the memoir to disseminate formerly unknown information to a wide range of people. While a highly sophisticated historical narrative is often presented, it still remains accessible to a large audience. While the process of articulation and organization is never



formulaic, research has been carried out which indicates that the very process of retelling can be an important component of the resolution of the trauma (Victor Frankel, 2000). Buss expounds on this idea from a literary perspective, 'this moment of reflection allows the self-reflexive narrator to carry out one of the most important tasks of the memoir: understanding the past for the purpose of changing the present' (Buss, 2002, p. 130). It is in this process of understanding that the witness moves away from the fragmentation and repression of the experience towards a holistic externalization of the trauma.

The process of retelling is evident in the memoir genre and psychological evidence to support the necessity of retelling has been outlined by Judith Herman, among others. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman (1997) notes that the process of narrative reconstruction is one of the five central elements of healing. She explicitly states, 'this work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story.' (Herman, 1997, p. 175). She postulates three interrelated elements of this witnessing are the attribution of meaning to the event, the engagement with a supportive community, therapist, or close confidant, and finally the action that the victim takes following the atrocity. According to Herman's hypothesis, 'The traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian, philosopher, and a jurist.' (Herman, 1997, p. 178).

This is a particularly apt analogy for the participants in this research. The subject of their belief, their adherence to the Bahá'í faith, was continuously drawn upon as a source of reliance and thought. It could even become a life-like companion. The history of this faith, its founders, and its central teachings, underwent a sort of intense personalization for the women. They would speak to me as though, at the most intense moment of persecution, particularly important figures would intervene and powerfully reinforce both their emotional and physical strength. Janet Khan looks to theories of the psychiatrist, Abdu'l Missagh Ghadirian, which echo this idea. She writes:

*'While there is a tendency in the West to equate suffering and martyrdom with defeat and failure, psychiatrist Abdu'l Missagh Ghadirian suggests that they might alternatively be characterized as "the victory of the soul". He calls attention to the fact that a person's faith in God is a dynamic force rather than a static state of mind. He states, "As a one's faith grows, so will one's ability to endure trials and tribulations that test one's sincerity and love of the divine reality'*

(Khan, 2005, p. 248).

Thus, it was a combination of the women's beliefs and individual effort and action in securing mental strength which enabled them to persevere in prison and during interrogation and torture.

Herman (1997) also points to the simultaneous private and public dimensions of remembering. 'Testimony has both a private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual, and a public aspect, which is political and judicial.' (Herman, 1997, p. 181). What the medium of memoir offers is the synthesis of the public and private dimensions of the trauma, which results in both a literary and judicial commentary on the event.

Both the memoirs and the interviews serve as important sources of data. Buss (2002) comments on the genre of memoir: 'Concerned with the self as living in, and as a product, of its communities, it is a facilitating form for the reenactment of personal and collective trauma, the witnessing to its reality and the process of its healing.' (Buss, 2002, p. 138). Likewise the narratives the women have provided should be valued as a political testimony, attesting to their inventiveness and resilience during their imprisonment. The narratives told and retold in both memoir and interview form to provide a unique insight into the ways Bahá'í women dealt with the experiences of imprisonment in Iran.

## **The Women, Their Context and Their Stories**

I am extremely grateful to these women who patiently explained and retold their experiences to me. Each of the women chose a pseudonym to be represented by, as this research deals with politically sensitive issues. The pseudonyms have a particular symbolic importance for each woman. Despite the painful nature of their prison experiences, the women also shared positive aspects of their present lives. A very condensed version of the stories told by two of the women follows.

### ***Farah***

Born in Hamadan, Farah's family was the first from a Jewish background to become Bahá'í in that city. When her children were grown, she returned to university and took the university entrance examinations. After completing law school – an achievement of which she was very proud – she began work in a law office.

With the start of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the ulama of the town began to harass her, as Bahá'ís became a targeted community. Eventually her husband, after some interrogation, was imprisoned. Farah was alone in

her home one evening when the revolutionary guards broke in. Farah and her husband were falsely accused of having weapons. The guards searched for jewellery and valuable items, as well as photographs. The next morning as she was being taken away, her Muslim neighbour, who had witnessed the scene, began crying and screaming, loudly protesting Farah's innocence. [That is, that she had not committed any crime. That she was Bahá'í was well known.]

She was taken to the court prison, and after long hours with no food or water, was interrogated. The local mullah continued to ask her questions. When she tried to answer, he would yell at her to shut up. This interrogation was prolonged. One guard reminded her to stay calm, and told her all that she had to do was to deny her Faith. She explained that she could not do so. The only thing she was imprisoned for was holding fast to her beliefs. In the middle of the night, she would be taken out of prison and forced to identify other Bahá'í homes.

Farah's neighbour soon alerted her father in Tehran to her imprisonment, whereupon he informed her employers. When her office found out she had been imprisoned, they went to the government ministry responsible for prisoners, and offered bail for her. The office was informed she could not be bailed out. In the night the guards took her to an unknown destination. Prison conditions were harsh, and became more so. Some time later, a guard asked who she was, and later realized that Farah's husband had been his former employer. This guard became committed to finding a way for her to leave the prison. She was then called to a mock trial, and due to her quiet composure, they asked for the deed to her house and released her.

The next day she went to work and told her colleagues what had happened to her. After nineteen days, she went to the judge with the deed to her house. She was able to secure the release of her husband as well, but within a short time he was ordered to go to Evin prison in Tehran. He remained there for nearly a year. In the middle of June, when she went to work, her colleagues told her that they had heard on the radio that her husband had been killed together with three other Bahá'ís. The next day, large numbers of Bahá'ís came to her home and insisted that she leave, since the government was sending the guards for her as well. For nine months she moved constantly, staying in hiding with friends. Farah's office told her that it would be dangerous for her to continue working. With the help of a number of professionals, she was smuggled out of the country.

Farah explained the great difficulties she had in coming to Canada, and that while she was waiting in Sweden, she had the opportunity to speak with a number of Swedish journalists. Talking about her ordeal became extremely

important for her, as a means of offering some small service for her friends in Iran. She knew that that every day they would proceed to execute seven to ten Bahá'ís and that there were many more Bahá'ís in prison.

### **Maryam**

Maryam was born in Tehran to a Bahá'í family. She completed her primary and secondary education in Tehran, and her Bachelor of Arts at the University of Tehran. She was just beginning her Masters program in translation, although the 1979 Iranian Revolution had already begun. This interrupted her studies. Already, Bahá'ís were not being permitted to receive higher education. When she went to the university one day, she was told that she no longer had access to classes. She then married a fellow Bahá'í man, whom she had previously known.

On a June afternoon, when the guards rushed into her house, it was obvious that they had followed her, and had been monitoring the house. Her husband had come home for lunch. The guards had a warrant to kill her husband on the spot. The couple decided that he should escape. It was at that moment that her life changed completely. The central fact was that the guards had broken into her home and arrested her for no real reason, taking her off to prison. All the other imprisoned women were accused of either sex work or drug and alcohol abuse. This was a tactic deliberately used by the government to humiliate the Bahá'ís. She was deliberately isolated from other members of the Bahá'í community, and thought that if she had been allowed to be with them, her situation would have been much easier to bear.

Maryam described how painful it was for her to realize that she had committed no crime:

*Knowing that you have not done anything wrong, or broken any law, yet you have still lost your freedom and you don't know what will happen next. Your fate, your life, is the hands of a man who knows nothing about you, and has been brainwashed...*

During this time her persecutors tried time and again to shake her convictions, change her ideas, and force her to recant. The guards would insult her Faith and yell at her, and she would utter not a word. She explained that she was not being timid, and admits to being terribly frightened. The reason she stayed quiet was because she felt they did not understand what they were doing. According to Maryam, an important factor in her resilience in prison was the fact of waking up every morning and talking and working with the other women. Facing their daily challenges required great courage and strength.

Maryam recounts being the letter writer of the group. Since many of the women in the cell did not read or write they would ask Maryam to write letters for them. One day, a female prison guard entered, and when she demanded to know who was the author of these letters, all the women remained silent. It wasn't until the guard revealed that she simply wanted to thank the author for the service she was offering that Maryam admitted it was she who had written them. The guard's gratitude was interesting to her.

There was a special division of prison officials focused solely on the Bahá'ís and that the particular interrogator who questioned her was the head of this division and noted to be particularly hateful. Her sister went to the main office to see the religious magistrate. He happened to be away on that particular day. She spoke to the person replacing him, and explained that Maryam was innocent. He considered this information and then said that if she could produce the deed to their house and some cash, she could bail her sister out, on condition that she would bring Maryam back if she were summoned. Her sister agreed and returned with the deeds and cash.

A guard told Maryam that the religious magistrate wanted to see her, and that she should take all her belongings with her. She was certain at that moment that she was going to be killed. But the guard took her to a room, made her sign a paper, and said she could go. She and her husband were reunited, but could not stay in any one place for long. Finally, the National Spiritual Assembly advised them to leave Iran as soon as possible. For months following her release, she thought she was being followed, had nightmares, and could not believe she was free. When they finally reached the neighbouring country, she could still see the shadow of the guard in her mind's eye. She rarely had a peaceful night's sleep, as the memories of her interrogations would flood her mind. The nightmares would not leave her for many years.

Maryam and her husband have been living in Canada for the past twenty-six years. She tells me how important it is to talk, and share her experience with others. Particularly upon her escape and arrival in the neighboring country, she recalls how important it was to talk about the experience with other members of the community who had also been imprisoned, and recently displaced.

## **Resistance in Prison Through Speech and Action**

The primary types of resistance I have identified from both the interviews and the memoirs include abstaining from conflict with the guards, police, and prison interrogators with whom the imprisoned Bahá'í women had to deal on a

daily basis. During the interview sessions, the women in my research explained that by remaining unprovoked they were subverting the intended psychological pressure of persecution and imprisonment. I propose that resistance also took a different form, in that the imprisoned Bahá'í women would openly respond to answers and ideas about their religion during their interrogation sessions. This act of *verbal resistance*, or a *resistance of words*, was a highly dangerous act. This type of resistance was particularly dangerous for the women, since they were directing their words to individuals who controlled their fate. In so doing they demonstrated their stoicism and resilience.

This is also demonstrated in the work of Olya Roohizadegan, which informed my own methodology, and my understanding of resistance. In her book of memoirs, *Olya's Story* (1993), Olya Roohizadegan, presented her own experience, and that of a number of other Bahá'í women who were imprisoned with her, in Shíráz in 1983. The act of verbal resistance is frequently illustrated in her book. Olya retells one such experience.

*'I noticed a pen on the floor. Automatically I picked it up and put it on the investigator's desk, saying, "Your honour, I hope your pen writes the truth and supports justice. And I hope your deeds are also just, because in the divine court of justice there will be no pen or desk, and the only measure will be of our deeds in this world'*

(Roohizadegan, 1993, p. 101).

This passage demonstrates several layers of resistance. First is the quick response of Olya to 'automatically' pick up the pen and to demonstrate her capacity to move and remain mobile. The second was her act of touching the instrument of the interrogator's power. The last was her verbal challenge to the interrogator, and perhaps the larger application of justice and equity. All this, it must be remembered, was being said to a man who had exceptional authority over her.

A second form of verbal resistance exemplified by the Bahá'í prisoners from Shíráz was their discussion and objection to their maltreatment in the presence of prison authorities. Roohizadegan narrates one such example between the husband and wife, Táhirih and Jamshíd Síyávushí:

*'I told him, "Jamshíd, if they kill you, I will see you in the next world. We will be there together." At that point I felt that Jamshíd wanted to tell me what they had done to him so that if I ever got out of prison I could tell the National Spiritual Assembly. He pulled up his shirt and showed me*

*his back. The lashes had caused his spine to become infected. He said to me in front of the interrogator, 'Táhirih, I have endured seventy days of torture and seventy sleepless nights. I don't know what more these brothers want from me. They torture me during the day and then they won't let me sleep at night. They keep asking for the registration book with the names and addresses of all the Bahá'ís of Shíráz. They say I have to go with them and show them the house of Bahá'ís. They also ask for the names of all the committee members and their addresses, especially the names of the members of the Local Spiritual Assemblies in the area. I keep telling them I don't know anyone other than myself who has been a member of an assembly, but they don't believe me'*

(Roohizadegan, 1993, p. 146).

The fear of sustained tortured and further imprisonment did not deter this couple from expressing the truths of their experience. Táhirih and Jamshíd Síyávushí were executed in Adelabad prison in Shíráz on June 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, 1983 (*United Nations Commission on Human Rights Report*, 1983, p. 6).

This verbal resistance is also performed by Mona Mahmúdnizhád, who was imprisoned at the age of seventeen, charged with having been a teacher of children, and later hanged for her beliefs. The following is an account of her trial as told by Mona Mahmúdnizhád to Roohizadegan.

*'The prosecutor looked at me astounded and said, 'Young girl, what do you know about religion?' Is there a better proof of my faith than the fact that I was taken out of school to be brought here and undergo long hours of trials? Can't you see that it is my belief that has given me the confidence to stand in your presence and answer your questions?'*

(Roohizadegan, 1993, 132).

All of these examples demonstrate the remarkable capacity for bravery of these individuals. This is not to say that these women did not experience emotional anguish and psychological repercussions from their experiences. Rather, these vignettes note specific acts of resistance at crucial moments of their imprisonment.

The women portrayed in *Olya's Story* (1993) were fortunate to have been placed together. Through their collectivity, they were able to find new strength

and to deliberate on ways to preserve their beliefs and integrity. I categorize this as resistance *through community*. It is explained in *Olya's Story* (1993) when she writes, 'Whenever we could, we gathered together in the cell and spent time joking and laughing to ease the pressure. Everyone had something to say, especially about their own prospects of being killed.' (Roohizadegan, 1993, p. 144). While there were no doubt differences of temperament and past experience, for the most part, it appears that the solidarity and support for one another acted to counter the emotional and psychological pressure of the prison. (Roohizadegan, 1993, p. 144). Maryam's services as scribe are part of the same dynamic.

Roohizadegan comments on her sentiments towards the community of women upon her release:

*'When you have suffered so much in company with other people, shared everything with them, and then you alone are released, the separation is almost unbearable. Everyone loves freedom, but you can never forget that your friends are still in prison, still suffering. Mítrá and I shared the same plate and even shared our food, but that evening I had eaten my own supper from my own plate, and she was still in that cell. Everyday we had taken our meager food to the Ishráqí's cell so that we could eat with 'Izzat and Roya. How could I enjoy my dinner with my family and friends all around me, knowing where those three women were, what they were eating?'*

(Roohizadegan, 1993, p. 195).

These seemingly simple acts took on an entirely different meaning and significance within the constraints of the prison. They are examples of resistance embodied and lived through each of these women.

## **Action and Community**

This section addresses two additional concepts that are important in the recovery from trauma. The women in my research felt that these two factors were critical for their individual survival and healing. The first pertains to healing through community and individual relationships, in which strong family and community bonds helped ease the burden of the traumatic experience while in prison and upon their release. These relationships were actively responsible for lessening the feelings of isolation that the prison experience introduced. Human relationships were central to the women's adaptation and survival during the prison experience. The second factor, the social action



that one takes in relation to issues of injustice, is a significant factor in the liberation from the fear and anger the trauma created. This can be specified as the retelling of one's story. Herman (1997) calls this one's 'survivor mission' and notes that it can take a range of forms (Herman, 1997, p. 207).

Just as the prison experience can sever particularly important relationships, so the work of recovery is primarily contingent upon restoring such relationships. Herman writes, 'Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience.' (Herman, 1997, p. 133).

All of the women of this research have each done several interviews in different media forums. From what I observed, the women do not share the intimate details of their stories in daily conversations, but having had the opportunity to explain the experience in different formal settings was of particular importance from symbolic, emotional and social perspectives.

## **Post-traumatic Growth**

Several theorists propose that traumatic experiences can in fact serve to strengthen and enhance individual relationships, an idea fundamental to the concept of post-traumatic growth. In their article, *Resilience and Thriving in a Time of Terrorism*, Tedeschi and Calhoun (Morland, Butler, and Leskin, 2008), write, 'The idea of positive adaptation – labelled as post-traumatic growth, adversarial growth, and thriving, among other appellations – signifies post-event adaptation that exceeds pre-event levels of functioning.' (Morland, Butler and Leskin, 2008, p. 43). This is a remarkable theory, which, despite the necessary considerations, exceptions, and complexities, has great relevance for the women of this research. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) also note, 'The general paradox of this field: that out of loss there is a gain.' (in Morland, Butler and Leskin, 2008, p. 43).

Central to the theory of post-traumatic growth is the fact that thriving exists simultaneously with suffering and the negative impacts that trauma produces. This suffering can often continue until a positive space is created, in which the trauma is fundamentally addressed and given meaning. A primary example of a negative impact of trauma is a loss of meaning in life, and heightened levels of stress. Therefore, the initial concern of those close to the traumatized individual is to create a safe and healthy environment to facilitate the processing of events (Herman, 1997, p. 53). Herman describes these responses to trauma.

*'To the chronically traumatized person, any action has potentially dire consequences. There is no room for mistakes. Rosencof describes his constant expectation of punishment, "I'm in a perpetual cringe. I'm constantly stopping to let whoever is behind me pass: my body keeps expecting a blow'*

(Herman, 1997, p. 91).

This reality must be remembered when assessing the impacts political systems have upon individual lives. The relationships that were formed during the prison experience were often described as being more intense than the family or chosen relationships that took place in ordinary life. This can be attributed to both the heightened emotions provoked by the situation, as well as the extremely small living spaces. It was this exchange, and the intensity of the experience, which made such interpersonal relationships so important for them. It was only after their release that speaking about their experiences served as an important aspect of reclaiming the experience and finding meaning within it. Clearly, healing relationships still serve as intrinsic to the women's resistance and activism in the Diaspora.

For some of the women, the prison experience was a continuation of other such trying situations. For others, the prison experience was a sudden and life-altering time with the discovery of new potentialities. While there is definite distinction between the various women's lives, positive transformation, although it took shape in many guises, was a clear outcome. The narratives of the women also continually intersected with the subject of gender equality, in that their courage and strength was of a nature that has historically been associated with men and the concept of the male warrior. This is, in my opinion, true feminism.

## **Concluding Remarks**

This paper has documented and analyzed legacies of feminist resistance by a number of Bahá'í women who all lived through persecution and imprisonment in their home country, Iran. These women, by knowing their own history, and the history of the community to which their deepest convictions are tied, drew on the exemplars and narrative of that history to inform their own personal narratives of resistance and resilience. Exemplars and history perhaps touch the deeper motivations and personal resources in ways that other idealizations or theorizing cannot reach so effectively. The sources of human motivation, will and aspiration to resist and survive need to be explored further, of course, but these stories do serve to point towards the

value of looking at the interaction between personal and community histories and narratives.

By rooting the theoretical dimension of this research in the principle of the equality of men and women as found in Bahá'í writings and history, a forum was provided whereby I could further understand the narratives of the Iranian Bahá'í women interviewed for this research. A key element was found in the importance of the education that the women had, as a result of this equality. The historical narratives then made the work of exploration and listening to these narratives much more cohesive. The principle of the equality of women and men, and Bahá'í beliefs and membership in this community was significant in that they played a triple function for these women. Firstly they were the sole reason for the women's imprisonment. Secondly, these principles and beliefs constituted the very core of their capacity to not recant their Faith, and to retain their identity and strength in prison. Finally, the same involvement, belief and association of which they were deprived during their prison and persecution was reaffirmed and strengthened as they built their new lives outside of Iran. Faith, identity, and association intersected in unique ways, and in a fashion that cannot perhaps be defined definitively, but rather was something I observed and am still continually learning about.

On a personal level, this research has changed the way I think, the way I see the world, and how I conceive of freedom. Even in the most remote cells, the attention that is given to prisoners by the outside world is what gives them hope and enables them to continue to fight for justice. Individuals around the world can draw the attention of their local governments and media to these crimes for all those suffering in Iran. The most horrendous crimes are committed when no one knows or cares. Or framed differently, the role of those outside of Iran can be to speak out and shine a spotlight on this dark subject. Ultimately the reason I work for human rights in Iran is rooted in a deep connection with Iranian culture, and a hope for a free future for this noble nation. I also see the true power of the human spirit to prevail and subvert the violence imposed on an individual. The women continually challenged me to know my freedom, understand it, and fight for my own freedom and that of others. They showed me the courage it takes to live in freedom.

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