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Dr. Samuel M. Jordan Center for Persian Studies and Culture, UC, Irvine,
Iranian Student Club, Santa Monica College, and
Iranian Federated Women's Club & Payvand, San Jose, California
Are Proud to Present:*

Three Speaking Engagements By:

Mehrangiz Kar

A Leading Feminist Activist and Human Rights Lawyer

Topic: "Crossing the Red Line"

Language of Presentation: Persian with simultaneous translation into English

Ms. Kar will sign copies of her latest book

When & Where

First Appearance:

Santa Monica College

Tuesday, March 6 at 11:15am to 1:30pm

The Concert Hall

Second Appearance:

University of California, Irvine 92697

Wednesday, March 7 at 8:00 - 10:00pm

Multipurpose Science & Technology Bldg. (MSTB) 120

[Bldg. #415 on the campus map below]

Third Appearance:

San Jose, California 95112

Thursday, March 8 at 6:30pm

Le Petit Trianon Theatre

72 North 5th Street



Mehrangiz Kar

A Leading Feminist Activist and Human Rights Lawyer

Mehrangiz Kar was born in 1944 in the southern Iranian city of Ahvaz, Iran. She attended elementary, middle and high school in Ahvaz, leaving in 1953 to enter the Department of Law and Political Science at Tehran University. In 1957 she completed her studies and went to work at *Sazman-e Ta'min-e Ejtemaii* (the Institute of Social Security). In 1959 she married journalist named Siamak Pourzand.

Before the Iranian revolution, Kar was active in the Iranian press, writing for such publications as *Ferdowsi* magazine on a wide variety of social issues of the day. Almost invariably, she was pictured alongside her articles without the *hejab* that has become *de rigueur* in contemporary Iran, sporting short hair. Following the revolution these images would be used against her.

Mehrangiz Kar is an attorney, writer and activist working toward the promotion of democracy, the rule of law and human rights within the framework of Islamic law in Iran. She has been an active public defender in Iran's civil and criminal courts, and has published regularly in several influential and independent Iranian journals. Ms. Kar has used international forums as a platform for voicing her opinions and advocating for the democratic, political, legal, constitutional, and human rights of the Iranian people.

Until the year 2000, Kar continued to work on human rights cases brought up in the context of the Islamic Penal Code in particular. She wrote articles for the nascent reformist press as well as such publications as the pioneering monthly women's review *Zanan*, worked as a human rights and women's activist, as well as a researcher.

A common theme throughout her work was the tension between the law on the books and core principles of human rights and human dignity. Throughout this time, the conservative press and the establishment blackened her reputation at every opportunity, accusing Kar of importing foreign ideas, Western vice and beyond. At least twice, she tried to initiate a women's advocacy NGO but was denied permission to register it under the country's laws.

**Unedited text of the speech delivered by Ms. Kar at
the University of California, Irvine on March 7, 2007**

P1

For the past many years both men and women in Iran have been involved in their struggle for freedom. This movement encompasses the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and underwent a new phase with the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The struggle for freedom has been strong and continuous. In the past 28 years, women have taken on new roles, adapting to the changing political context. Thus, women's social and cultural significance has made it impossible for fundamentalists to ban them from universities. P2

When the religious fundamentalists came to power, they encountered women who were educated in universities prior to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and who occupied important social and political positions in society. These women were not willing to forfeit these positions without a fight. They were not prepared to accept the official order to wear the hijab, to abandon their educational and professional positions, nor accept the fundamentalist ideology that relegated women to the home.

P3

Another group of women welcomed the Islamic Revolution and the chador as a potential for new freedoms as a mean to escape the tight control of their religious families. For this reason, this group of women was active in the Revolution. Some women, who were raised in very controlling traditional and religious families, hoped that the Revolution would increase their status and respect in their families resulting in more opportunities to participate in social and leisure activities. Some other women who were raised in less traditional and more modern families also wanted to abolish the legal inequalities women faced and expected to achieve these goals and secure a better social and political situation for women through the Revolution. Although both groups of women were hurt by the decisions made by the fundamentalist groups in the Revolution, they nevertheless continued to challenge and transform these obstacles to women's human rights in their respective ways.

P4

Currently, over 65% of students entering university in Iran are women. Gradually, these women will become a strong force making their dissatisfaction with the inequalities in law, society and the family known. Iranian women have not achieved this statistic easily and it remains very vulnerable. In fact, the current government has planned to reduce the number of women entering universities and has set up obstacles making it more difficult for women to obtain higher education.

P5

After the Revolution, women who played an important role in it with the goal of revers-

ing discriminatory laws against women, were shocked to find that these goals not only remained intact, but that the human rights that women had achieved before the revolution were being eroded. After the Revolution, Islamic scholars decided that women could no longer be judges and ordered that the headdress be mandatory. Additionally, laws pertaining to the family that were beneficial to women were abolished and career women that did not adhere to the strict hijab regulations lost their jobs.

P6

[Special Police] began enforcing the new hijab regulations and women who were not properly covered-up with the hijab were punished. This policy still exists today. In the past two years, women's groups who mobilized against unjust laws were increasingly faced with repression by the government [or: fundamentalist faction?]. Women were alongside men in the struggles, negotiations, and war but have since been excluded from the official records of these struggles.

P7

Historically in Iran, history and memoirs were written by men. Since the revolution, women's struggle has not just been about the hijab, but also about maintaining their careers and positions and at times, [at times going so far as to cost them their lives/ even lost their lives in these struggles]. As women never felt the need to write history from their own perspective, this has resulted in men giving an official version of history that relegates women to the margins of politics and important events.

P8

It can be said that this is a consequence of women's shortcomings in several areas and that their impact in the writing of history was not as significant as it could have been. Women's perspectives did not have as much of an impact as men's, and in order to reverse or moderate the official story given by religious fanatics, they will need more [study]. It seems that this is starting to take shape and a new future for women's history in this political arena is developing. To make this reality, women will need to further develop their educational, and communication skills and will have to more fully participate in the formation of social, economic, and political policies.

P9

It appears that there is still a lack of effective input from Iranian women in important areas such as education. Here too, it seems that the ice is melting and the voices of women are uniting and being heard. This new reality is creating new horizons [new possibilities?], as the incredible presence of young Iranian women's weblogs demonstrates. The short stories written by women under censorship also highlight this coming future.

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Stories [memoirs] about being imprisoned, articles written by women outside of Iran, films and theatre productions that struggle to make it to the stage in Iran, indicate the hard work done by women directors, artists and actors behind the scenes and under

ensorship to tell their own stories from their own perspectives. This is the birth of the new voice of Iranian women. In this context, their persistence is astonishing. This phenomenon of women's presence in the recent history of Iran is like a magnificent plant that is growing worldwide. For instance, a beautiful Iranian woman from Canada risked her life speaking out for another Iranian woman in prison [in Iran] who was sentenced to death. Her commitment of time and energy finally led to the freeing of this condemned Iranian woman. Iranian women, through the use of all the available networks of today, have come together. [Need to fill out]

P11

The unique history of each of these courageous women, their personal struggles, household issues, the conflicts they face within their societies, demonstrates the history of modern Iranian women. It is not enough for intellectual and famous women to write their life stories and biographies. It is essential for average, everyday women also to get involved in communicating the challenges they face in their [the?] families and in the present patriarchal society. The perspectives of women who are farmers, housewives, or real estate agents are just as valuable in illustrating the history of Iranian women as those of the Better Known Women.

P12

This fuller involvement is necessary for the broader women's movement. In the social and political context of Iran, women's voices have yet to be heard and aspirations realized. Women in general have been able to "cross the red lines," but in some areas, these boundaries are not only related to political issues, but also have social and cultural roots.

P13

Crossing these red lines is perhaps the greatest challenge. Even though Iran underwent two revolutions in the name of freedom, in 1979, the social and cultural red lines and boundaries dating 400 years ago within the Arab world were changed into law by the present Islamic government in Iran. People challenging such discriminatory social and cultural laws are therefore seen as opposing Islam. This is a dangerous situation for people working towards women's rights, because they are seen as challenging Islam itself, and as a result are punished. Even in light of this situation, however, there have been women who are still struggling for women's rights and in doing so, are crossing these red lines.

P14

I wrote a book entitled "Crossing the Red Line" in order to shed light on the work of such writers, journalists, lawyers, and activists. Two reasons influenced decision to choose this title: First, right after the revolution, debates about revolutionary and Islamic values were heated, and the government placed a limit of the boundaries of this debate. In 1997, the reformist media coined the phrase "the red line" to encompass the limits on freedom of speech imposed in the name of Islam. Some fundamentalist fac-

tions that were opposed to these reformists would regularly ensure that writers and journalists not cross this red line. Little by little, the red line became an established reality in the political culture of Iran.

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The debates around women's rights have been and continue to be the strongest red line. Currently, there are two women's rights campaigns in Iran. One of these campaigns is the "One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws." The other campaign is trying to abolish the stoning of women. Even though the people involved in these two campaigns are under constant fear of being arrested, they continue their peaceful struggles without a direct confrontation with the government. This example is sufficient to show that even though women in Iran live under the laws of fundamentalists and face constitutional inequalities, compared to neighboring countries, they have still managed to achieve many victories.

P16

In the past three decades, even when faced with harsh inequalities, women's motivation, courage and strength have not died. In this sense, Iran is unique among Muslim Middle Eastern countries. Even in comparison to Israeli women, Iranian women have been just as successful. Women's struggles in these areas have been continuing since 1906. Iranian women, with their determination and involvement in the historical struggle for freedom, were able to become highly educated. Women's education is not limited to theoretical sciences, but also includes their outstanding achievements in physics, mechanics, electrical engineering, and other technical fields.

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Unlike many other Muslim countries, women in Iran received the right to drive at the same time as men. Even though the law and fundamentalists restrict women's entry into key government positions, women have held and still do hold some positions. Women have broken through gender limitations in the fields of medicine, law, engineering, and academia. This presence is vital to the functioning of Iranian society. In Iran, men and women workers are both involved in the struggle for worker's rights. They are also involved in peaceful protests alongside nurses and teachers.

P18

After the Revolution, due to inflation and the high cost of living, women, even with their hijabs, took on a larger role in the work force. Even in the absence of equality in law, women have had no unique obstacles in the area of investment based on their gender. They face the same instability as men with regards to investments. If this changes, women will be a great source of business development. Currently, twelve hundred women in Iran operate their own businesses and have business licenses. As a result of Iranian businesswomen's demands, the [Otagheh Bazarganie va Sanaye va Ma-aden] has established a special committee for women business owners and investors.

P19

Even in the face of censorship and political obstacles, Iranian women continue to advance in the fields of art and literature. The number of women writers has grown. In their stories and work, they describe the realities of discrimination against women. After the Revolution, the percentage of women writers has outnumbered men. Women also comprise the majority of readers. This will undoubtedly have an impact on social change in the future and will have a huge effect on how Iranian men think about the capabilities of women in this area.

P20

In the face of censorship and political obstacles, Iranian women are creating important award-winning works in the fields of film and theatre. Women playwrights, directors, and actors have taken this industry by storm. These women are highly educated in the field of theatre.

Iranian government regulations have established strict rules about actors in plays and theatres: women actors are wearing hijab and romantic relations between men and women can only be portrayed without physical contact on the stage or in film. Even under these conditions, women theatre and film directors have demonstrated their amazing ability to tell love stories in indirect and creative ways, while maintaining the power of the emotions being displayed.

P21

We can therefore conclude that women are crossing the red line. Some women authors have produced powerful literature that deals with the subject of women's issues and lives. The ministry of [Ershade Eslami], especially under the government of President Ahmadinejad, has reduced allowed publications. My name is among the list of women authors who are banned from publication, even though I was consistently active in writing in newspapers in both the pre-revolution and post-revolution periods in Iran.

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Furthermore, I have written about the unjust social and legal position of women in Iran. I am familiar with the censorship of both the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras, and even with my own self-censorship, I have still been refused publication. As a result, I have given up and now publish outside of Iran [with Roshangaran publishers]. In this respect, I regret that I am unable to publish in my own country, which is, in my opinion, a grave misfortune.

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In conclusion, in my book, "Crossing the Red Line: The Struggle for Freedom in Iran," I discuss how women are not allowed to be judges in the fundamentalist government and I also discuss techniques to help women challenge the limitations they face. Before the Revolution, women [judges/lawyers] were very highly regarded. During my internship as a young lawyer in Iran, I felt proud in my field. With the Revolution, women were forced to adopt clever and cautious techniques in order to cross the red

lines they faced while still keeping their positions.

P24

Women's prohibition from the field of law created many disruptions. The issues facing women in Iran are universal. They are not simply related to Islamic societies. Recent events in the United States of America help demonstrate this point. Even in the United States of America, a country where women have achieved a certain level of equality with men, it was still newsworthy when Nancy Pelosi became the first female Speaker of the House in the history of the U.S. Congress, or when Dr. Drew Faust became the 28th President of Harvard University. In Western countries, there is a discrepancy in women and men's wages and representation in high positions as well as other forms of gender discrimination.

P25

Iranian women have a long road ahead of them. They have also achieved many victories. My book deals with only a small part of a much larger problem. The achievements about which I have written were attained in the harshest conditions. It was precisely at that time that women struggled the hardest. Some of these women were lost, while others found a light to continue in their struggles. The challenges they face are heavy, and in crossing the red lines, women are forced to accept certain interim compromises, however they will never compromise their ultimate goal; freedom and justice for ALL.

Thank you