

INQUIRER

Western women turn a blind eye to Iranian struggle



An Iranian university student attends a protest inside Tehran University while a smoke grenade is thrown by anti-riot police. Picture: AP

Caroline Overington, The Australian, 12:00AM January 6, 2018

It is one of the great conundrums of Western feminism: why are we so excited to stand up for Muslim women, except when they live in the Middle East?

Show us a woman in Sydney who wants to cover her hair or swim behind a modesty curtain, you'll have Western women fighting and writing for her right to so do.

Show us a woman standing bravely without her hijab on a street corner in Tehran?

Crickets.

Why?

Why does the West insist on showing off its support for hijabs and burkas on Muslim women in the West, but not for women who yearn to be free in the Middle East?

Obviously we have to do the first bit. Tolerance, diversity and the freedom to choose are the hallmarks, and the foundation principles, of the Western democracy.

If you want to wear a hijab in Australia, knock yourself out.

But why such principles don't make us more, and not less, likely to stand up for women as they stand up in Iran is the mystery.

All they want is what we have: the right to choose a path in life.

And all they stand to lose is their lives.

This week's protests in Iran have been extraordinary for the bravery of women, many of them acting alone. The most famous image, thus far, is of a young woman standing on a bollard, or box — it's not clear in the image — by the side of the road. She has removed her hijab and she is waving it at the end of a rod. The picture of this woman — the Hijabless Woman, as she has been dubbed — belongs on the front page of every newspaper in the world. She is braver than a lion. She is standing in defiance of religious clerics, including the Supreme Leader in the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose brutality knows no bounds.

The hijab is compulsory in Iran. They forced it on women in the late 1970s, at the same as the regime took agency from women. Protests began almost immediately but the pushback was fierce, and all women and girls are now forced to endure the humiliation of allowing others to dress them in the morning.



An Iranian dubbed Hijabless Woman stands in defiance of the Tehran regime.

Those women who are protesting against the hijab are standing against their repression, the ignominy of being told what to do, and where to go, and how to act. They are standing as adults — courageously — in a country that treats

them like children. They are standing against clerics clinging to a doctrine composed by men to subjugate and repress women, and that reminds women every day that they — their flesh, their hair, their very being — is sinful.

The dumbest ox of a man in Iran has basic rights. He has freedom. He can work and travel. The smartest woman lives under the threat of the rod.

It's an intolerable situation, and Iranian women would appreciate the support of Western sisters as they battle for their rights. But where is the West on this issue?

It is promoting the views of women such as New Yorker Lindy Sarsour, who was honoured as one of Glamour magazine's 2017 Women of the Year. She wears a hijab of the type favoured by clerics in the most extreme regimes, who like to see the fabric covering all of a woman's hair, gathered together under a woman's neck.

Western feminism is celebrating sportswear company Nike for making and selling a stretchy hijab for women to wear while exercising in a full body covering. It is distributing thousands of copies of a poster of a Muslim woman wearing an American flag, fashioned into a hijab, as if the hijab is an American ideal.

The hijab is not a democratic ideal. It is a symbol of the repression of women in the Middle East. In no culture should it be compulsory and in no Australian school should it be part of the uniform. Iranian activist Darya Safai, who is in self-imposed exile, put it best on Twitter this week: "The veil in general is not an innocent piece of clothing. It is a symbol of discrimination."

That is because the veil can't be separated from culture or indeed from law. It stands for a particular philosophy that deprives women of rights and freedom. It is a symbol of those regimes that do not regard women as equal in rights and dignity.

So where is the West's support for the Hijabless Woman?

The video in which she appears reportedly was sent from Iran to an Iranian activist in New York, Masih Alinejad, who runs a website called My Stealthy Freedom, which post images of Iranian women as they cast off their veils, or else — if they really can't, and who can blame them? — wear white on

Wednesdays, to protest against the fact they are treated like sinners or like juveniles instead of like fully functioning adults in their own country.

Alinejad told The Weekend Australian it was taken a day before widespread, anti-government protests broke out, and that she was proud to post it, and did not doubt its authenticity.

That did not stop the website BuzzFeed dissing the image, describing it as “old”. “People are using an old image of a woman without a headscarf to illustrate the Iran protests,” BuzzFeed said, in a tweet. “The image was not taken during the current unrest.”

The subtext?

Nothing to see here. Old, fake news.

In fact, the image was uploaded to My Stealthy Freedom just a day ahead of anti-government protests that have rocked the Islamic Republic this week. Perhaps it inspired some other young women to take to the streets. Perhaps the fact it was shared online emboldened those who might not have otherwise turned up.

Here is a woman, prepared to take a stand. If she can do it, shouldn't I?

Tweeter @MarmarMoshfeghi objected to BuzzFeed's coverage, saying: “I am from Iran and every day many women are arrested because of they didn't cover their hair properly. If a woman doesn't wear scarf at all she will be lashed.”

Another tweet said: “Why is BuzzFeed running defence for Iran's Islamic theocracy?” What does BuzzFeed think the protests are about?

The protesters are calling for an end to the rule of Iran's Supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. They want a less corrupt government. Free elections, a free press, an independent judiciary, and equal rights for men and women. A loosening of the stifling patriarchy. Freedom, sweet economic and personal freedom, for women.

Brave Muslim women.

The battle for these rights in the Middle East is as important as the battle to end slavery in the US, or the end of apartheid in South Africa. How could it be otherwise? The foundation principles are the same: liberty and equality for all.

It should concern us in the West that women are today still held in bondage, wherever they may live. It should humble us that some are brave enough to take a stand. Iranian women unquestionably depend on the West for support. They need to know that we are watching. Now is not the time to turn away.