

## Women's Suffrage

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July 19-20 marked the 175th anniversary of the start of the women's suffrage movement at the Women's Rights Convention held at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. Organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Coffin Mott, Martha Coffin Wright, Mary Anna McClintock, and Jane Hunt, the Convention brought 300 people together to discuss and debate the social, civil, and religious rights of women in America.

Just a few weeks before that Convention, halfway around the world, a 22-day conference had begun in the village of Badasht, in the Semnan Province of Iran. It was at this conference that Tāhīrih (the Pure One), an early Bahá'í, a poetess, and a heroine of Iranian history, removed the veil from her face in public—a shocking act for that time and place—and courageously advocated the emancipation of women.

Two years later she was arrested, and in 1852 she was strangled to death by the order of the royal court. Her final words were: *"You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women."*

On June 18, 1983, 135 years later, 10 Bahá'í women were taken to a square in Shiraz, Iran, under the cloak of night. After months of torture and imprisonment, they were executed without the knowledge of their families. One was 17, most in their 20s. Their crime was their belief in a faith that promoted gender equality, justice, and truthfulness. They were hanged one by one, each forced to watch the next woman's death in a harrowing attempt to coerce them into renouncing their faith. None did.

Following that tragic event and for the four decades that have followed, hundreds more Bahá'í women have been persecuted—facing discrimination both as women and as Bahá'ís—imprisoned, tortured, and executed. Bahá'í women serving in positions of influence in the country have been dismissed from their jobs, arrested, or killed. Those left to live have been barred from universities, public employment and virtually all aspects of social life.

And today, just like women before them, thousands of young women in Iran are bravely and joyously standing up for the principles of justice and equality at any cost, even their own lives.

The stories of these women are one. They are chapters in the unfolding story of women's resilience and sacrifice—both in the east and the west—for civil rights, human rights, and equality.

175 years after the Seneca Convention, discrimination against women remains one of the injustices of our time. As we strive to achieve gender equality in our families and in society, the Bahá'í writings remind us that *"the equality of men and women is a facet of human reality and not just a condition to be achieved for the common good. That which makes human beings human—their inherent dignity and nobility—is neither male nor female. The search for meaning, for purpose, for community; the capacity to love, to create, to persevere, has no gender."* Therefore, *"as women are afforded their equal place in society and as women and men increasingly join together to solve the world's greatest challenges, humanity's future prospects grow brighter."*