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## It's Hard to Debate Feminism When You're Dodging Bullets

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I was watching CNN the other day. There was a discussion about whether feminism was obsolete.

Is being a feminist about living the life you want? Or is it meeting a check list of beliefs? Can a conservative woman ever call herself a feminist? Or - as Republican strategist Mary Matalin argued - is that impossible given how the word is "described by liberals today?"

And so it went: point and counter point on the road to non-conclusion.

A little while later, CNN was back to the streets of Tehran, where women young and old, rich and poor, in skirts and chadors were saying something powerful about the irrelevance of what feminism is and is not.

For me, the women on the streets of Iran these past days have only one label: heroes.

I watched one being beaten with a metal rod. I watched another wrap herself around a fallen man to protect him from being killed. And like all of us, I watched in disbelieving rage as Neda Soltan died before my eyes, killed by a bullet to the chest, fired by a man she never saw and didn't know, for reasons that may never be entirely clear.

They were there for reasons that run deeper than the probable rigging of one election. They were fighting for change.

In one of history's sad ironies, the regime they helped topple in the 1979 revolution was replaced by one that almost immediately set out to strip away their rights. Ayatollah Khomeini asked them to fight tyranny; then his clerics imposed a tyranny that - for women's rights - was far worse.

One freedom Iran's women refused to abandon, however, was educational opportunity. In the 30 years since the revolution they helped win, they have flooded universities. Advanced programs are filled with women who in earlier generations would have been illiterate and home bound; living to meet the needs of a man she was given to in her early teens.

But when women leave the universities, things change.

They enter a world of denial and limitation - in divorce, child custody, inheritance, crime, employment and personal freedoms. The reformist regime of Mohammed Khatami began to lift the oppressions. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad slammed them back into place - with a vengeance that reflects every bit of the hard-line fears of Iranian women as the political force history has shown they can be.

Universities have capped the number of female students, new legislation proposes easing restrictions on polygamy and funding for women's groups has been halted. Those joining women's movements risk beatings, detention and harsh interrogation. The men in power have mandated how women can dress - particularly the hijabs the government says must cover female heads every day - and censored web sites that deal with women's health.

Said author and journalist Azadeh Moaveni, Ahmadinejad has been "a catastrophe for women." And women may well be a catastrophe for this repressive regime.

As CNN's Christiane Amanpour reported: "I see lots of girls and women in these demonstrations. They are all angry, ready to explode, scream out and let the world hear their voice. I want the world to know that as a woman in this country, I have no freedom."

The police with their water cannons and tear gas; and violent gangs of vigilante Basijis with their iron bars and guns, have for now cleared the streets of mass protest. But history suggests that brutality is not going to stifle the voice of Iran's women. They are too strong, too determined and they have been at this too long.

I truly hope one day they will have the luxury of debating the fine points of who can call themselves a feminist. Right now, they have a revolution to fight.