

Unprecedented political journey of a woman in Islamic Republic’s history

What led to a ‘complete repentance’ from politics?

Social Desk The news of the passing of Monireh Gorji Fard on January 12, 2024, came as a great surprise to many who were unfamiliar with her, particularly when they learned that she was referred to as “the only female representative in the Assembly of Experts [Iran’s only constitutional body with the authority to appoint and dismiss the leader].” So, who was this woman with such a unique experience in the history of the Islamic Republic, and how did she live her life?

Monireh Gorji, a name intertwined with the struggle for women’s rights and the promotion of Qur’anic teachings during Iran’s Islamic Revolution (1979), is a remarkable example of courage, faith, and awareness. She not only stood against beliefs rooted in inequality but also became a voice for equality and justice by interpreting the Qur’an with a new perspective, from her childhood up to her membership in the Assembly of Experts. Described by “Seyyed Abbas Salehi,” the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, as a “pioneering Qur’an scholar, a virtuous teacher of ethics and knowledge,” she consistently defended the role of women in society. Her social, political, and Qur’anic activities serve as a model for women seeking to effect change and make an impact in society. This report explores the life, contributions, and perspectives of this enduring figure.

Path from Qur’anic learning to family life

Monireh Gorji was born in 1929 on Iran Street in Tehran. Her original name was Monireh Ali, but she later adopted her husband’s surname. At the age of five, during the reign of Reza Shah, she began attending school, where her love for the Qur’an took root. A blind elderly man taught her the Qur’an at school. Once she memorized a few verses from Surahs Ale Ma’idah and Ale Imran, she dedicated herself to the understanding and interpretation of these verses. She also learned Arabic from a teacher, but it was her own determination and effort that brought her a deeper understanding of the Qur’an’s meanings. At 15, she married Mehdi Gorji, which left her secondary education unfinished. However, her passion for knowledge drove her to pursue studies and research in Islamic texts at the age of 35.

Collaboration with Ayatollah Taleqani

Before the Revolution, Gorji encouraged women to engage politically and socially by holding Qur’an interpretation classes with a revolutionary approach. She also played an active role in rallies and demonstrations. During the pre-revolution era, Ayatollah Taleghani [an Iranian theologian, senior Shia Islamic scholar, and democracy advocate] invited her to accompany him in Qur’anic sessions, where she would respond to the concerns of women. This request marked a turning point in her social life. However, her involvement was not without pressures; although she was never arrested, she received warnings from the SAVAK (Organization of National Security and Information, the secret police). Gorji emerged as a revolutionary speaker in the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution, with her sermons from 1978 to 1980 gaining significant notoriety. She founded the first specialized non-governmental organization for women, named the Women’s Studies and Research Institute, and played a crucial role in raising women’s awareness. Participation in the Assembly of Experts: ‘I am sure I am not sinning; anyone who thinks they are, should leave!’ After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Gorji participated in the elections for the Assembly of Experts at the insistence of Mohammad Hosseini Beheshti [the poetic philosopher, cleric and politician] and was elected as the only woman in this assembly. Despite the opposition and protests regarding her presence in this assembly, she remained steadfast in her responsibilities, declaring that she was there to represent the women of society. With 1.5



● IRNA

million votes from the people of Tehran, she accepted her role and advocated for women’s rights.

What led to a ‘complete repentance’ from politics?

Gorji played an undeniable role in drafting the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran during her time in the Assembly of Experts, even as her presence in this inaugural electoral body was fraught with challenges. She made significant efforts to defend women’s rights within the assembly. When one of the representatives remarked, “This assembly is a place of sin; a woman among 70 men?” she boldly responded, “I am sure I am not sinning. Anyone who thinks they are, should leave!”

In pursuit of women’s rights and their empowerment

In her speeches, Gorji repeatedly emphasized that “God addresses all humanity in the Qur’an without distinction between men and women or social class.” She criticized the misuse of Islam to demean women, reminding her audience that Islam placed great value on women 1,400 years ago. Gorji made the teachings of the Qur’an the foundation of her life, stressing the respect for all individuals regardless of gender or class. She hoped

for a day when humanity would be recognized in the same honor and dignity that the Qur’an bestows upon them. This devout and courageous woman never wavered from her ideals and remained loyal to the Qur’an and humanity until the very end of her life. In a part of the message from President Masoud Pezeshkian regarding her passing, it was stated, “This committed and popular figure, who was the first female member of the Assembly of Experts, left an indelible mark in the history of this land through her effective presence in various political, cultural, and social arenas, including teaching, clarifying, and promoting Qur’anic concepts and Islamic values, founding the first Women’s Studies and Research Institute, and having a special focus on the status of women and families within the political and social structures of the country.” Shahindokht Molaverdi, the former deputy for Women and Family Affairs, described her as a Muslim fighter and eloquent speaker who played a significant role in raising awareness among women through her speeches. Masoumeh Ebtekar, another prominent female political figure, praised Gorji’s services over the years, calling her a teacher for others and stating, “Lady Gorji taught us to dare to think about the Qur’an at a

time when some believed we should follow it without question.” She advocated for critical thinking within the Qur’an. Reza Salehi-Amiri, the current Minister of Cultural Heritage, referred to Monireh Gorji as a “human capital” of society, representing a balanced and rational approach to women’s roles, which are defined both at home and in the community. The words used by Mohammad Khatami, the former Iranian president (1997-2005) in his message on the occasion of Gorji’s passing, describing her as “a learned and virtuous lady who understood pain,” reflect a facet of her character. The dedicated Qur’an scholar consistently fought for women’s rights and sought to elevate their status in society. Her efforts in the Assembly of Experts, particularly regarding women’s rights, did not go unnoticed. Mohammad Javad Hojiti Kermani, a member of the assembly, recounted that “many principles related to women in the Constitution are the result of Ms. Gorji’s efforts. She opposed the use of the term ‘men’ in the presidential election law, asserting that the Qur’an recognizes all human beings as equal, regardless of gender.”

Gorji’s views on certain women’s issues

- Polygamy: She considered this ruling

applicable to a specific historical context and believed there is no justification for polygamy in the present time. - Mandatory Hijab: She opposed the compulsory nature of the hijab, arguing that it should be accepted through personal choice and inner faith. - Women as Presidents: Regarding the interpretation of the term “men” in the Constitution, she believed this term means “person” and should not be a barrier to women’s presidency. [In Arabic, the term “rejal” is a masculine plural noun that primarily means “men”. However, when examining its usage in the country’s Constitution, it is possible to consider the implications of gendered language. While “rejal” may be used as a reference to individuals or persons]. Gorji exemplified the efforts of Iranian women to achieve equal rights and participate in political and social spheres. Her activities in the Assembly of Experts and her advocacy for women’s rights mark a pivotal moment in contemporary Iranian history.

Stepping back from politics

Throughout her political career, Gorji faced numerous challenges, including opposition from some traditional clerics and the male-dominated society of that time. During her brief tenure in the Assembly of Experts, she endured significant hardships while defending women’s rights and a progressive interpretation of Islam. However, after that period, she never ran for any elections again and, as she put it, made a “complete repentance”. Consequently, following her time in the assembly, she withdrew from political activities due to certain political irregularities and turned to Qur’anic interpretation. She stated, “When I left the assembly, I drew a line around everything. You have no idea what was going on in the Assembly of Experts. I neither took a bite of bread nor received a single rial in salary. Nothing.”

Cultural advocacy

After completing her term in the Assembly of Experts, she stepped away from public office and focused on academic and educational activities. Her work included teaching jurisprudence, interpretation, rulings, and ethics. In 2008, she published the book “The Qur’an’s Perspective on Women’s Presence in the History of the Prophets,” which reflects her profound understanding of women’s status in religious texts. This book meticulously examines the place of women through the lens of Qur’anic verses and the history of the prophets. In it, Gorji not only offers a detailed analysis of women in the Qur’an but also critiques various interpretations while providing innovative perspectives on the history of the prophets and women’s roles. The book “Half a Century of Struggle and Thought by Monireh Gorji” is a publication from the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs. It explores the life and Qur’anic thoughts of this esteemed scholar. The book recalls Gorji’s childhood, including her studying the Qur’an by the light of the moon, and addresses her Qur’anic and social activities over half a century, highlighting her impact on various generations of women.

Passing

Ultimately, this Qur’an scholar, who taught us to seek refuge in the Qur’an during difficult times, passed away on January 12, 2025. “Fateme Mohajerani,” the government spokesperson, referred to Gorji’s commitment, faith, and unparalleled role, considering her a model for devout and influential women in contemporary Iranian history.



● The photo grab from a movie by IRNA features Monireh Gorji Fard as the only female member of the Assembly of Experts of the Constitution after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.