TRANSCRIPT
Smart Women, Smart Power
“The Fight Continues for Iranian Women”

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FEATURING
Masih Alinejad
Iranian Journalist & Activist

CSIS EXPERTS
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Kathleen McInnis: This is Smart Women Smart Power, a podcast that features conversations with some of the world’s most powerful women.

Masih Alinejad: In 21st century women, girls are getting killed for simply showing their hair. That’s the simple explanation about what’s going on in Iran, and that actually shows you that we are dealing with a monster.

Kathleen McInnis: We feature thought leaders at all career levels where we explore, among other things, the many contributions that women make to the fields of international business, national security, foreign policy, and international development. Does having women in positions of power influence the outcomes of decisions in these fields? Why or why not? Join me, Dr. Kathleen McInnis, director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for these incredible conversations.

Last September, the tragic death of Mahsa Amini spread across global headlines, and the fight for women’s rights in Iran was brought to light. The injustices in Iran continue to make headlines with the reported assault of a 16-year-old named Armita Garavan. We’ve had one year since the Mahsa Amini protests, so much is going on in Iran, and women are at the forefront of this political, sociological tsunami. And so our guest today, Iranian journalist and activist, Masih Alinejad, I’m so grateful to be able to learn from you, giving your experience not only as an Iranian woman in exile but your fight on the front lines for women’s equality in Iran. So I’m hoping we can learn from you today. What’s going on today? What’s the prognosis of the Iranian regime in your view, and what do we in the international community need to do to help?

Masih Alinejad: I have to say that in 21st century women, girls are getting killed for simply showing their hair. That’s the simple explanation about what’s going on in Iran. And that actually shows you that we are dealing with a monster, with a gender apartheid regime. Yes, Mahsa Amini got killed just because a little bit of her hair was visible and right on the first anniversary of the brutal murder of Mahsa, now another girl is fighting for her life because she’s in a coma. Why? Because she refused to cover her hair. And I have to say that the brutal murder of Mahsa Amini became a tipping point for the Islamic Republic and for millions of Iranian, it became like, "We had enough. We were fed up by the morality police." But now let me just make it clear. We went beyond morality police. We don’t want just to get rid of compulsory hijab or morality policeman. We want an end for this gender apartheid regime.

Kathleen McInnis: And so, how do you see the international community responding?
Masih Alinejad: That's a good question. That's a good question. You know why? Because from the beginning, it was beautiful. When I was watching all women across the globe, leaders, athletes, actress, well-known feminists were cutting their hair. But at the same time, I was very honest and telling the rest of the world, "Hey, solidarity is beautiful, but it's not enough. We don't want you to cut your hair. We want you to cut your ties with our killers." And that is how international community can help. Otherwise, let's just be clear, now, the Islamic Republic is going to kill another woman. Why? Because of the lack of strong action from the international community. All those Western female politicians who cut their ties, they are the one now inviting Ebrahim Raisi, inviting the mayor of Tehran, inviting the members of Revolutionary Guards to European Parliament, to EU, here in America, the United Nations. So there is no reason for Islamic Republic to stop killing women. There is no reason for the barbaric regime in Iran to harass women, to torture women, to beaten up them in the streets when they don't see any punishment.

Kathleen McInnis: There's no consequences. There's no long-term consequences. And they're just, they've been waiting out the international community for us to just lose our attention and..

Masih Alinejad: Exactly. Hey, let me just ask you a simple question. Imagine it was not Mahsa in Iran being beaten up to death. Imagine it was not Armita, 16-year-old beautiful girl, being beaten up by morality police. It was a girl here in New York. It was a girl in Sweden, in England, in European countries being beaten up, getting killed, facing rape in prison, for the crime of showing their hair or for the crime of not wearing hijab. What would've been the reaction of the rest of the world? Imagine it was not women of Iran being kicked out from a stadium. It was women in America. What would've been the reaction of FIFA? They would've said like, "Oh, it's okay. This is their culture." No, we, the women of Iran, deserve the same actions and the same reactions from the international community, isolate the Islamic Republic and kick them out from everywhere until the day that they respect women.

Kathleen McInnis: So one of the things that we are noticing is that a lot of these authoritarian regimes actively use gender and women's repression to consolidate the regimes and both internally and as excuses for terrible behavior in the international stage, right? You see that with Putin's Russia and the invasion of Ukraine. We're starting to see that with Xi Jinping regime and Taiwan. So in your view, what does this gender repression and this doubling down tell us about the regime and also its weaknesses?
Masih Alinejad: Exactly. Dictators. All dictators, they're really scared of women, free women, powerful women, because they know that women have nothing to lose, especially women in autocracy and dictatorships. We've been fighting for every single right every single day. So they know that if we gain the power to say no to dictators, then we're going to empower women across the globe. So that is why in the Middle East women's body became a tool, became a platform for gender apartheid regime like Taliban, like Islamic Republic to write their own ideology on our body. When you go to Iran, when you go to Afghanistan, the only way that you understand that these countries are being controlled by Islamic states, it's just through us. It's not through men. Because we are forced to carry the main visible symbol of oppression. We are the one that if we don't cover our hair, we won't be able to go to school. We won't be able to get an education. So that is the way that dictators are controlling the whole society through women, through us. And they know that if we say, "No, we're not going to buy your narrative," then we can empower men as well. That's why they're scared of women.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, and when you disenfranchise, you know, half your population, you do not allow them to be a part of the economy in meaningful ways. What I'm noticing is that these regimes look for external excuses for the problems that they face. And again, this gender apartheid begins to have real hard national security implications because of the violent extremist organizations that they support. Their shenanigans, let's be mild in the term, in places like Africa. So the gender apartheid is a real indicator of national security problems that we as the United States and other democracies to...

Masih Alinejad: Get involved, to get involved. As you said, beautifully, gender apartheid is a global struggle. You can't just say that let Iranian women deal with it within the country. Let just women of Afghanistan deal with it within their own society. Let Africa--. No, you cannot say that because dictators have their own networks. They have alliance of dictatorship are very clear. They're helping each other to spread misinformation, fake news, disinformation. They are providing drones and weapons for each other. They're helping economically like sponsoring each other. But we, the feminists, the global feminist movement, we're not as united as dictators because sometimes we close our eyes and we say that in the name of white savior complex, in the name of the culture relativism, let's not get involved. That's wrong. Because when we keep quiet in the face of Taliban and Islamic Republic, these gender apartheid ideology can be spread across the globe. Imagine before September 11, you were walking in the streets in New York and asking people that what should we do with Bin Laden? Maybe people were
saying that this is none of our business, but you see more than 3,000 innocent Americans got killed. So this is the same. I believe that if we don’t get united to end gender apartheid regime to end autocracy, to end dictatorship, they will get united and they will end democracy. They will end equality. They will end each of us everywhere. So you see in all international laws, you see the definition of apartheid. Yeah, but how come that there is no mention about the definition of gender apartheid? So that is why we, the women of Iran and Afghanistan, we launched a campaign to call everyone, everyone now hearing me, to join us and ask your policymakers, your leaders, to expand the definition of apartheid, to include gender as well. That’s how, legally, we can get united and fight back altogether against gender apartheid regimes.

Kathleen McInnis: So to give our listeners a sense, how’s the experience of women in Iran right now changed over the past year or frankly not?

Masih Alinejad: Oh, can I be honest with you?

Kathleen McInnis: Please.

Masih Alinejad: A lot. A lot. Because the fear inside us is gone. Now, this is the Islamic Republic with guns and bullets, with money, with power. They’re really, really scared of teenagers. You tell me, what is the reason that Khamenei, this master killer saying to its gang of killers, to the Revolutionary Guards, to the morality police, not give up on compulsory hijab? Why? Because he’s scared of teenagers. It is sad. It is beyond sad that in 21st century women are facing brutal oppression just because of being girls and women. But at the same time, I’m telling you that the Iranian clerical regime, they are in a serious crisis. They know that this is just the beginning of the end for them. And that is the only thing that I can say changed. Otherwise, women still are not allowed to go to school without covering themselves. Women are still not allowed to get a passport or travel abroad without getting permission from their husband. Mothers of those people who got killed or not even allowed to express themselves. Right now they’re talking to, first they beaten up Armita and now they arrested her mother. I mean, I get goosebumps. The parents of all those people who got killed are in prison for the crime of being parents and loving their beloved one. So these are the situation in Iran, but nothing going to happen, this is my true answer, if the international community still legitimize this barbaric regime.

Kathleen McInnis: What specific, in addition to expanding this definition of apartheid, to include gender, what else can we do? Banks, leaders, what should we be doing?
First of all, I want to ask the international communities, not just the leaders. I want to ask the school girls, teenagers, this is about you. A woman-led revolution is taking place in the history and teenagers are in the frontline. So I want the school girls to join us and have a day of action, stop going to school, showing your solidarity with the girls and teenagers in Iran. Imagine a day that all schools, colleges showing their solidarity sitting down and saying that we're not going to go to school for the girls in Iran and Afghanistan being kicked out from schools. That is going to be an example for the leaders of democratic countries that would put pressure on the democratic countries. And another thing that I want, just think about it, that if it was not Iran, it was, as I said, women of the West being kicked out from a stadium and school, then what would you ask your leaders and policymakers, do the same. Send the letters and ask them to boycott Iran, to isolate, to boycott the Islamic Republic from all international federations because they're using sport washing to normalize the gender apartheid regime. You either believe this is a gender apartheid or not. If this is a gender apartheid, then how come you’re giving them Olympic platform? You’re giving them all the International Sports Federation, giving them a platform to normalize such a barbaric regime. And another thing is that I want the leaders of democratic countries to understand that if they addressed Putin as a war monger and they put Wagner group in the terrorist list, then what is different between Wagner group and the Revolutionary Guards? What is different between Putin and Khamenei? While Khamenei and Revolutionary Guards are sending drones to Putin to kill innocent Ukrainians. So clearly here we are dealing with two evils, two war mongers, Putin and Khamenei. They are united. I want the leaders of G7, the democratic countries to be united and isolate, ban and kick out these two dictators from everywhere. That’s my point. And I don’t think this is too much to ask.

Yeah, I am here in America. I live in New York, and I was the target of kidnapping plot. I was a target of assassination plot. Believe me, I’m not scared for my own life at all. My heroes are these teenagers facing guns and bullets every day. But at the same time, this is scary that you see Islamic Republic feel empowered to send the killers on U.S. soil. And congratulations to Biden administration because they have been handing out billions of dollars for what is called "prisoner swap." Instead of actually asking their allies to be united to downgrade the diplomatic relation with this hostage takers, they’re actually telling them that hostage-taking diplomacy works, assassination diplomacy works. So what I want? I want the U.S. government. I mean, America is the dream country for everyone. I want the U.S. government to take the lead and ask its own allies to isolate gender apartheid regime from
everywhere. This is what President Biden in his, when he was very young, he was all about banning South Africa because of the apartheid. Now he's supporting the negotiation, diplomacy. The Islamic Republic doesn't understand the language of diplomacy. Their language is torturing, raping, killing, taking hostage. That's all. So you have to take concrete actions in the face of this barbaric regime instead of legitimizing them.

Kathleen McInnis: Thank you so much for your time today.

Masih Alinejad: Of course. Thank you. Thank you so much, my sister. Our sisterhood will save, not only Iran or Afghanistan, will save democracy across the globe. Thank you so much.

Kathleen McInnis: Thank you.

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