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## Images of an Undocumented Revolution: Interview with Claudine Mulard

Ellen McLarney, Negar Mottahedeh, Claudine Mulard

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## Interview with Claudine Mulard

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Initially, this was just to attend as a matter of solidarity. Solidarity was a big thing in women's lib, in all the liberation movements in those days. Just to attend, to be there, [to] say we were there and with them if they needed us. Then, because of

Khomeini's decree to reimpose the veil on Iranian women, the 8th of March took a very different turn. There were some demonstrations on March 7, but then, on March 8, it really, really picked up.

Women decided to have this march on Monday the 12th. We brought over a crew, women from our group who had the know-how, [including] Sylvina Boissonnas, a filmmaker in her own right with a movie selected at Cannes [Film Festival] called *Un film (A Film)* in 1970, in [the independent section] Directors' Fortnight. It was our equipment. We filmed with real cinema equipment that had been used by the New Wave movement, meaning a 16mm Beaulieu color camera and a Nagra sound recorder. So, that's how it happened.

The first move was to just be there, out of solidarity. And then we decided that things mattered so much that we wanted to record it.

**EM:** What was it like to be in the midst of revolutionary Iran at that time?

**CM:** I think very soon after we landed . . . we didn't believe it was going to be a revolution. We met many people who had come back from exile in France or the United States, who told us how disappointed they were, immediately, be it only for that decree [about the veil] and also prohibiting women from being judges because supposedly they were too emotional. You could say that Iran was just—it had an uprising. It was still very chaotic in the town, but the Revolution, no, we didn't see any of that.

**EM:** What do you mean by *chaotic*?

**CM:** There were still some incidents, some shootings in some areas of Tehran. I mean, sporadic. We knew that it was just an interim government. There was no real democratic government in place at that time. Maybe, also, the reaction to the new decree was—it was a complicated situation, like all political situations. That's what I meant.

**EM:** Was there euphoria?

**CM:** Yes. There was a lot of euphoria. In “Téhéran, mars 1979 avec caméra et sans voile” I say how women really thought at the time that they would prevail, because on that Saturday [March 10], Ayatollah Taleghani issued a statement pulling back from the decree [Mulard 2010]. The women were led to believe that their initial reaction had worked and that maybe the interim government was going to backtrack and give up this very repressive policy that they were starting to implement.

The march [on Monday] was enormous in terms of the number of people who [attended]; it was incredibly electric, even though we didn't understand every word of it. However, we could feel the enthusiasm of the young women in particular. Yes,

there was euphoria, because, I think for a few days they did believe that it was going to work. The nurses said that very well in the film, that, before the constitution was written, they were hoping that they were going to be heard. They had participated in kicking out the shah. They had a sense of strength, of empowerment, as we say, that they could carry on the next step for them[selves], for their rights. But that didn't happen.

**Negar Mottahedeh:** March 8 fell on a Thursday in 1979. The decree was made on Tuesday, March 6, two days before. People marched on Wednesday the 7th and then again on International Women's Day, March 8. On the 11th there was the Taleghani decree that said, "No, the veil is not compulsory." Everyone was euphoric. At the same time, there was a pullback by many women, because they thought they had won, and many didn't come to the march scheduled the next day, on March 12, because they thought the issue was settled, but the issue wasn't settled.

**CM:** Maybe. I've never thought about it before. Maybe it was kind of a maneuver to prevent the march from happening and calm down the women and then, once the 8th of March euphoria had dissipated, go back to their repressive policies. Yes, I had never thought about it that way.

**NM:** Even before you came to Iran for the March 8 celebrations, was there a march or a protest planned?

**CM:** There was a march planned later in March, and when the situation evolved so rapidly. . . . I guess the women had anticipated that there could be the coming back of a Muslim religious regime that could curtail the rights they had in Iran. They had anticipated that, and probably they were able to move so quickly because of the 8th of March. We don't know. They decided to plan the march much earlier for the Monday, for the 12th.

**EM:** What was it like to be in the middle of these women's demonstrations?

**CM:** It was heaven! I've gone to many marches in many cities in the world, but that one was a—plus this was a country we didn't know, but you could definitely sense the enthusiasm. Also, what moved me very much—and even at the time it was visible—is that you had women without a head scarf. You also had women who were wearing the veil. They'd always worn the veil and they would continue, but they were there to defend [the right not to wear it], as two of them say in the documentary. One of them had six daughters, and she wanted her daughters to have the choice. It was a matter of having the choice, not being for or against; but whatever a woman wanted to do, she should have the right to do it. It matters very much to understand that, in that context.

**EM:** In the film, one of the women being interviewed says, “It’s about the veil. It’s about the hijab, but it’s about more than that. It’s about equality.”

**CM:** Yes, of course. I remember a woman at the Ministry of Justice — it’s not in the documentary, our crew had not arrived yet — saying that she had even come with a scarf on purpose to show that the scarf was not the issue. The scarf was part of the issue, but the issue was broader. It was women’s rights, women’s rights to divorce if they wanted to, women’s rights to contraception and abortion if they wanted to, women’s rights, of course, to work. It was a broad issue for women that has been carried on worldwide by all the women’s liberation movements.

**NM:** The only film clip that was shown on Iranian television at all about the six days of women’s protests was taken from inside the Ministry of Justice. The cameras were turned on the women who arrived with big sunglasses and fur coats. It was a strategy by the interim government, which was headed, at least in the sphere of the media, by Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, who was the right hand of Khomeini while he was in exile. This clip was a way to show that these protests were actually driven by Westoxified or Western feminists. It’s interesting to hear that women actually showed up with the head scarf and in some cases fully covered, and that these women weren’t even shown on national television.

**CM:** Yes. At least one to whom I spoke very directly, she was the one who said, “I [wore] it on purpose, because I wanted to make sure that people understand it’s not the only issue.”

**NM:** Could you describe the feeling of the last protest that took place on March 13 at the television station and what that was about? Why were the women’s protests taken to the television station, and what happened there?

**CM:** [A woman we interviewed] Haydeh, the one who speaks in French, explains it in the film. She says that in fact what happened is that the media, controlled by the regime, had reversed the situation, had said that women had attacked men with knives. No such incidents ever happened, but that’s the only thing that was reported. The women were very angry at the misrepresentation of the huge march that had happened on Monday. Their next move was to complain and protest in front of the TV station. That was pretty chaotic. First, there were fewer women, maybe a couple hundred. You can see on the photos and on the film that we were surrounded by men. There was always a cordon [around us], and I looked carefully at new pictures that I got yesterday [March 20, 2019] and you can see a cordon of men who are sympathizers of the women, and then, behind, you have the screaming, hysterical bullies who don’t want the women to be out and don’t want the women to protest.

**NM:** Were there men at the marches who protected the women who were marching?

**CM:** Absolutely. There were definitely men present. In any demonstration, you always have to have some kind of control. Some men were doing it, yes, they were protecting the women.

**EM:** You see something similar in the women's march in Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. However, in the film, when you're interviewing Kate Millett, she says that she had never witnessed anything like that before. What did she mean by that?

**CM:** I think the women's liberation movement in the United States started completely differently. First there were books. There was Kate [Millett]'s PhD thesis, "Sexual Politics," and there was more organization. It happened in a calmer kind of way, and maybe Kate didn't witness May '68, which I lived through. I was twenty in May '68. That was pretty chaotic. It was not like one party, or one organization, or one group saying, "We need to do this. We need to do that, and it's going to happen this day and that day." It was all very spontaneous, and I think Kate had never lived through something like that. I guess we were more used to it, our generation, because we were French and had known May '68. It's true, [in Iran] it was completely spontaneous and not just organized by one group, or one association, or one person who said, "We've decided this is what we're going to do." It all flared up very much on its own.

**EM:** You've worked very much in feminist collectives. How would you describe the collective and collaborative nature of your feminist action? . . . Éditions des Femmes — wasn't there a printing collective and the bookstore?

**CM:** There has been, since 1974, a publishing house and a bookstore, in Paris. Then we published a monthly magazine for a year, and then a weekly magazine for over two years, both of which I coordinated.

What I could say, and I could say practically because I've been asked how it worked out for the four of us: There was myself, Sylvina Boissonnas, Michelle Muller, and Sylviane Rey. We had been activists together. We had worked together, and it worked. There was a real flow. There were no issues. Each was there with her talents. We were really a team. We liked each other. That, I guess, is part of us. It's something that you have built up when people have worked together, respected each other's talents. There were no power issues, at least in Tehran. It was a power-free zone for us. That's what it is to work in a collective. It's something very precious. That was also very much part of the practices of the times, the idea of collective endeavors, you know?

**NM:** Have you noticed a lack of that kind of teamwork or connection in the way that you're describing it in more recent social movements, especially the social network movements that often emerge online, like #MeToo, #TimesUp, or even #WhyIStayed, and all these movements?

**CM:** Right now I'm active with another collective, CODEPINK: Women for Peace. I see this [group] as very active, determined, but nurturing. There is a sense of togetherness, which I think our civilization is losing. I'd say this is something that women know how to do, probably better than men, if I can generalize like that. I think we have more attention to the other.

**EM:** On that note, I want to ask you about being invited to Tehran. You talked about solidarity, that you went "in case they needed us." What were the politics of French-Iranian feminist solidarity like at that time?

**CM:** That's kind of hard [to say], because it was our first encounter with Iranian women, so it was the beginning of something. I cannot make a general statement [to answer] your question. Very early at the march, and before our crew had arrived, I ran into a group of very, very vibrant schoolgirls, and they had their bags like this, and they were marching like that. So, we got together. There was one from a French school, who did the translation. We exchanged our names and numbers. They wrote down their names in my notebook, and it seemed like there was an immediate connection, because we had the kind of freedom to come from Paris and to see what was happening and help. It seemed like, spontaneously, we were sisters. That's a word that has been overused, but that's what it is. We saw them later on during the march. I was the one who took the still photos, I had climbed on something to get a better angle for a photo, and they were there in the march. One of them, Mojgan, ran and gave me a pendant with her name written on it in Farsi. I think the connection was immediate. Our difference was the language, but the connection was there and we didn't need words to express it.

**EM:** Can you talk about the process of making the film in the midst of the demonstrations?

**CM:** That was quite a feat. That's very heavy cinema equipment. Now we're used to taking photos and recording with very light equipment, but in those days that was not the case.

We were just four, and the Beaulieu and Nagra [cameras] are heavy. With a Beaulieu, you have to have someone else do the zoom manually. There is a photo by Sophie [Keir, Kate Millett's partner at the time] where you see Sylviane filming and Michelle doing the zoom manually. I think we reloaded during the march, and the reloading part is quite a [thing]. I always joked that this is where a chador is really, really useful! Because you have to reload under a black hood to not damage your film.

We did our best. I think we sensed the emergency, the urgency to record as much as we could. I'm so happy that even though the situation on that Tuesday outside the TV station was very chaotic, we decided to go because Mojgan call[ed] our hotel.





the status of women, or women's marches, or demonstrations at that point in the American press. By April all the news on Iranian women [had] ended in the United States. I'm just wondering how this was in France: if there were still news reports coming out about the status of women under the interim government, or under the new government that was established at that time.

**CM:** We tried as much as we could. We kept in contact with Faranguis [a woman we had met in Tehran]—I don't recall her last name—who commuted between Paris and Tehran, and she was the one to update us, but the updates were very sad, because there was nothing to report. I also received a quite vibrant and very smart letter from Mojgan, and even though she was very young at the time, she explains that "the situation in Iran [has] become terrible, and we are not going to recover for a long time." She already anticipated that this was not a temporary situation, and she was also saying that this was the way it was going to go in Morocco, Tunisia. She anticipated lots of things. She was very politically aware, probably from a family that's very politically aware. So, no, nothing much . . . nothing was happening . . . until the Green Movement thirty years later.

**EM:** What is the state of feminist solidarity to you today, perhaps in comparison to what we saw in the 1970s?

**CM:** I think it's huge. I think we planted the seeds. Look at the #MeToo movement. This is just a very, very direct consequence of things that we've denounced. We, I mean international women, have denounced for years the violence, the harassment, the rape, the fact that the cities at night are dangerous for us in most countries. Solidarity is not something that goes easily. It's probably taking a different turn. When I used the word *sisters* earlier, I [thought,] "Oh my God, I haven't used the word *sister* in a long, long time." The vocabulary is different. Clearly, the internet and social networks have changed the ways to communicate. Yes, it's there, and it's not going to go [away].

**NM:** You noted that the screening last night at Duke University was only the second public screening in forty years of the film that you made of the women's movement and the marches in Iran. Do you regret that it hasn't been shown more often?

**CM:** Yes. I made many efforts contacting Des Femmes to have them release and distribute it, because they're still a publishing house. They never did. I had even more regrets at the screening yesterday. It was great that there was a screening, but the only video that's available—someone must have digitized a copy and then put it on YouTube, on March 7, 2009, exactly. The picture toward the end is damaged. It's sad because the quality of the movie is great. Also, the [English] subtitles were done spontaneously. That's nice. I saw once a version that had been dubbed in Farsi. I saw once a version that had been subtitled in Arabic. That's really nice that they picked it

