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Dr. Jeanne Buckley

Well Behaved Women Seldom Make History

4 December 2014

Shirin Ebadi

In 2003, Shirin Ebadi became both the first Iranian and the first Muslim woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. According to BBC, Ebadi won the prize because "as a lawyer, judge, lecturer, writer and activist, she has spoken out clearly and strongly in her country, Iran, and far beyond" ("Profile: Shirin Ebadi," 2009). Ebadi, who has held many positions of power, has always used her platform to speak out about injustices and defend universal human rights. I chose to write about Shirin Ebadi for this assignment because I wanted to pick a woman who was extremely influential, but not as well known. Prior to this assignment, I had never heard of Shirin Ebadi. However, upon conducting research about her, I realized how much work she has done to protect the rights of those living in Iran, especially women and children. Ebadi serves as a symbol of hope and challenges the "oppressive patriarchy of Iran" (Ebadi, 2006) in order to create a world where women are treated as equals to men and all citizens can exercise political freedom.

Shirin Ebadi was born on June 21, 1947 in Hamedan, Iran. She only lived there for a short time before her family relocated to Tehran, Iran. Ebadi grew up in, what she thought to be, a normal household. She had parents who loved both her and her brother as well as each other very much. Her parents taught her to pray, but it wasn't until she had her own spiritual awakening while praying one night that she acquired a strong belief in God. From that moment on, her faith remained an integral part of her life. Growing up,

Ebadi was treated with the same respect as her brother, which is uncommon in Iranian households. In Iran, sons typically “enjoy an exalted status” (Ebadi, 2006, pg. 11), but Ebadi never felt that her parents valued her brother any more than they did her. However, the servants in the Ebadi household were astonished that her father allowed Shirin to fight with her brother. When Ebadi got older, she realized that gender equality was not something that was promoted in every Iranian home and made it her goal to change the patriarchal mindset in Iran (Ebadi, 2006, pg. 10-12).

Ebadi entered Law School at Tehran University in 1965, which was not uncommon at the time. This is where Ebadi truly became the activist she was destined to be. The “intellectually charged campus” (Ebadi, 2006, pg.15) was where she first participated in protests and became involved in politics. Upon finishing law school in 1970, Ebadi became a judge, representing the Ministry of Justice in Iran, at the age of 23. Though it was not particularly unusual to be a female judge in Iran at the time, Ebadi felt as though her independence and career choice made men reluctant and even fearful to approach her. However, Ebadi did eventually marry a man, who supported her independence and was not afraid of her bold nature, named Javad Tavassolian in 1975 after six months of courtship (Ebadi, 2006, pg.16-26). Ebadi and Tavassolian had two daughters together: Negar, born in 1980, and Nargess, born in 1983. Throughout their lives, Ebadi instilled in them the importance of education and equality.

In 1975, after Ebadi had married, she challenged Iran's patriarchal society by becoming the first female president of the Tehran city court. However, following the 1979 revolution in Iran, the Iranian government declared that women were “unfit to be judges” (Penketh, 2013) and Ebadi was demoted. She did not go willingly and waited

until the government officially stripped her of her judgeship and demoted her to clerk. On the first day of her new job, she showed up at the office, declared that she had been demoted against her will, and proceeded to sit at her office and refuse to do any work, which she continued to do for her entire employment there (Ebadi, 2006, pg. 48-50).

Because of the oppression that Ebadi faced in the workplace, she decided to retire early in 1984 (Ebadi, 2006, pg. 73). She had waited in hopes that the system was going to improve, but it had remained sexist and unjust. In 1992, the judiciary allowed women to begin practicing law once more (Ebadi, 2006, pg. 110). Ebadi established her own law practice to take on cases that violated human rights (“Profile: Shirin Ebadi,” 2009). She struggled against the corruption that still evidently existed in the Iranian judiciary system, but she remained honest and loyal. Ebadi chose to pick cases that “illustrated the tragic repercussions of the theocracy's legal discrimination against women” (Ebadi, 2006, pg. 111). Ebadi won several high profile cases, despite being wrongly imprisoned for her involvement in one of the cases. During Ebadi's time as a lawyer, she established two NGO's in Iran: the Society for Protecting the Child's Rights and the Defenders of Human Rights Centre (Missaglia, 2011). However, the Defenders of Human Rights Centre closed in 2008 after it was raided by the Iranian government and exists mainly online (Penketh, 2013).

In September of 2003, Ebadi was invited to attend a seminar in Paris on the city of Tehran. Despite efforts by the Iranian government meant to discourage her from going, as they liked to control who represented Iran and what was said about the country, Ebadi flew to Paris and brought her youngest daughter with her. On her way to the airport after the seminar, Ebadi received a call informing her that she had won the Nobel Peace Prize.

She had heard rumors that her name was on the list, but an Iranian newspaper published a story claiming that her name had been deleted, so she hadn't thought much about it. Ebadi was both shocked and overwhelmed (Ebadi, 2006, pg. 200-201).

After Ebadi received the Nobel Prize, becoming both the first Muslim woman and the first Iranian to win the award, there was much speculation about how the Iranian government would react. Ebadi claimed that her receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize “is a recognition by the international community of the cause of Islamic feminism. Therefore, Muslim women around the world and all of those who have worked for the cause of human rights in Iran are partners in this award” (Pal, 2004). Directly following the announcement that Ebadi had won the Nobel Prize, Iran's government supported her and even provided her with 24-hour body guards after she received an excessive amount of death threats. However, in November of 2009, the Iranian government confiscated Ebadi's Nobel Peace Prize Award (“Shirin Ebadi Nobel Peace Prize,” 2009) and demanded Ebadi pay the government \$410,000 in taxes from her \$1.3 million prize money (“Profile: Shirin Ebadi,” 2009). When Ebadi refused, they froze her bank accounts. According to Norway's foreign ministry, this was the first time that national authorities had taken action such as this against a Noble Peace Prize winner (“Shirin Ebadi Nobel Peace Prize,” 2009).

Following the controversial presidential elections in Iran in 2009, Ebadi was forced to flee the country for fear of her life and the lives of her loved ones. After receiving threatening messages ordering her to stop doing her work, her husband was “severely beaten” in Tehran (Penketh, 2013). Ebadi now resides in London without her husband, as he is forced to remain in Iran and is banned from international travel.

However, Ebadi continues to be outspoken about the subject of human rights, particularly those in Iran. Ebadi left a legacy to future Iranian woman by proving that one can accomplish great things and be internationally recognized for her efforts despite having an oppressive government. Ebadi has hope that the Iranian government will change and reverse the patriarchal society. The director of the Organization for Defending the Victims of Violence (ODVV), Alireza Taheri, believes that “Ebadi’s prize as an encouraging sign, pointing out that moving toward legal reforms and modifying cultural structures are key to eradicating the traditional cliché regarding the role and the status of women. Such reforms have become essential goals of Iranian civil society” (Monshipouri, 2004, pg. 6).

Prior to researching Shirin Ebadi, I knew that women who lived in the middle east were oppressed and denied equality. However, after reading more about Shirin Ebadi, I realized how much those women truly struggle. Especially after reading Ebadi's first hand account of her life as told in her memoir, I learned how relentless and persistent women in the middle east have to be in order to have their voices heard. These women are always at risk of being in danger due to the patriarchal societies. However, I have hope that with more people like Shirin Ebadi working in the field of human rights, equality will be one day be achieved world-wide.

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