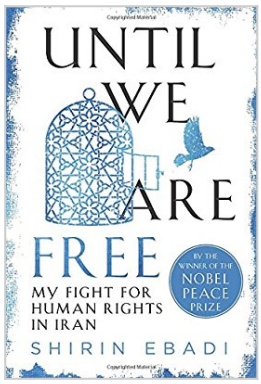

Until We Are Free: My Fight for Human Rights in Iran

By Shirin Ebadi

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The first Muslim woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, Shirin Ebadi has inspired millions around the globe through her work as a human rights lawyer defending women and children against a brutal regime in Iran. Now Ebadi tells her story of courage and defiance in the face of a government out to destroy her, her family, and her mission: to bring justice to the people and the country she loves.

For years the Islamic Republic tried to intimidate Ebadi, but after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad rose to power in 2005, the censorship and persecution intensified. The government wiretapped Ebadi's phones, bugged her law firm, sent spies to follow her, harassed her colleagues, detained her daughter, and arrested her sister on trumped-up charges. It shut down her lectures, fired up mobs to attack her home, seized her offices, and nailed a death threat to her front door. Despite finding herself living under circumstances reminiscent of a spy novel, nothing could keep Ebadi from speaking out and standing up for human dignity.

But it was not until she received a phone call from her distraught husband—and he made a shocking confession that would all but destroy her family—that she realized what the intelligence apparatus was capable of to silence its critics. The Iranian government would end up taking everything from Shirin Ebadi—her marriage, friends, and colleagues, her home, her legal career, even her Nobel Prize—but the one thing it could never steal was her spirit to fight for justice and a better future. This is the amazing, at times harrowing, simply astonishing story of a woman who would never give up, no matter the risks. Just as her words and deeds have inspired a nation, *Until We Are Free* will inspire you to find the courage to stand up for your beliefs.

Praise for *Until We Are Free*

"Ebadi recounts the cycle of sinister assaults she faced after she won the Nobel Prize in 2003. Her new memoir, written as a novel-like narrative, captures the precariousness of her situation and her determination to 'stand firm.'"***—The Washington Post***

“Powerful . . . Although [Ebadi’s] memoir underscores that a slow change will have to come from within Iran, it is also proof of the stunning effects of her nonviolent struggle on behalf of those who bravely, and at a very high cost, keep pushing for the most basic rights.”**—*The New York Times Book Review***

“Shirin Ebadi is quite simply the most vital voice for freedom and human rights in Iran.”**—Reza Aslan, author of *No god but God* and *Zealot***

“Shirin Ebadi writes of exile hauntingly and speaks of Iran, her homeland, as the poets do. Ebadi is unafraid of addressing the personal as well as the political and does both fiercely, with introspection and fire.”**—Fatima Bhutto, author of *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon***

“I would encourage all to read Dr. Shirin Ebadi’s memoir and to understand how her struggle for human rights continued after winning the Nobel Peace Prize. It is also fascinating to see how she has been affected positively and negatively by her Nobel Prize. This is a must read for all.”**—Desmond Tutu**

“A revealing portrait of the state of political oppression in Iran . . . [Ebadi] is an inspiring figure, and her suspenseful, evocative story is unforgettable.”**—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

“Ebadi’s courage and strength of character are evident throughout this engrossing text.”**—*Kirkus Reviews***

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About the Author
Dr. Shirin Ebadi was one of Iran’s first female judges and served as the first female chief magistrate of one of the country’s highest courts until the 1979 Islamic Revolution stripped her of her judgeship. In the 1990s Ebadi returned to the law as a defender of women’s and children’s rights, founding a human rights center that spearheaded legal reform and public debate around the Islamic Republic’s discriminatory laws. She has defended many of the country’s most prominent prisoners of conscience and spent nearly a month in prison in 1999 for her activities. For many years she was at the center of Iran’s grassroots women’s movement. In 2003 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. Since the election uprising of June 2009 she has lived in exile.

Chapter 1

Intimidation

The story of Iran is the story of my life. Sometimes I wonder why I am so attached to my country, why the

outline of Tehran's Alborz Mountains is as intimate and precious to me as the curve of my daughter's face, and why I feel a duty to my nation that overwhelms everything else. I remember when so many of my friends and relatives began leaving the country in the 1980s, disheartened by the bombs raining down from the war with Iraq and by the morality police checkpoints set up by the still new Islamic government. While I did not judge anyone for wanting to leave, I could not fathom the impulse. Did one leave the city where one's children had been born? Did one walk away from the trees in the garden one planted each year, even before they bore pomegranates and walnuts and scented apples?

For me, this was unthinkable. When I walked into the country's highest court and the new revolutionary authorities told me that women could no longer be judges, I stayed. I stayed when the authorities demoted me to clerk in the same court I had presided over as a judge. I shut my ears when the revolutionaries who had taken over the justice system talked in my presence about how women were fickle and indecisive and unfit to mete out justice, which would now be the work of men. I stayed as the Iraqi warplanes bombed houses on our street to rubble. I stayed when the new authorities said Islam demanded violent justice, that Islam allowed for young men and women to be executed on rooftops and hung from cranes for their political beliefs, their bodies dumped in mass graves.

In the same way that I did not leave Iran, I did not leave Islam, either. If we all packed our suitcases and boarded planes, what would be left of our country? If we bowed our heads and stayed quietly at home, permitting them to say that Islam allowed the assassination of writers and the execution of teenagers, what would be left of our faith?

I wrote long letters to friends who had emigrated, on the thin, diaphanous paper we used for airmail in those days, and told them that I was still managing to live. In the mid-1980s, I stopped working altogether and turned inward, disconnected from the brutal politics of the new regime. Despite the bombs and the morality checkpoints, my husband and I raised our two girls, who went to school in pigtails and learned how to read. We had dinner together every night. My husband, Javad, continued with his work as an engineer, and I raised the girls, contemplating how I could reinvent myself, now that the judiciary had become the realm of men.

In the early 1990s, after the war had ended, the girls were older and didn't need me as much. I briefly tried practicing family law, but I saw quickly that the courts under the Islamic Republic operated very differently than they had under the shah. The authorities permitted women to work as lawyers, but the system and all its new procedures were so dysfunctional that it was impossible to take a case forward. On several occasions, I had trouble simply trying to review a file at the courthouse. The clerk, upon realizing that I wasn't going to "tip" him for retrieving the file (corrupt countries have endless euphemisms for bribery), would say, "Sorry, the file is missing. Come back tomorrow." I would go back the next day, and he would say, "Sorry, I haven't had a chance to search for your file." On the third or fourth day, knowing that I would keep coming back, he would finally produce the file. But because I wasn't prepared to pay a bribe, I had lost two or three days of work.

It was much worse in the courts. There, the person who was willing to pay more was in the right; justice was bought, not fought for or deliberated. To protest, I eventually hung a big sign in front of my law office: "Due to the current inhospitable circumstance of the courts, I will no longer be accepting clients and can only offer legal advice." This did not feel, at the time, like a particularly risky thing to do. I was simply being honest about the country's legal climate, rather than consciously trying to defy the state. But I see now, and learned with time, how peaceful disobedience can be a powerful act of defiance. After a while, people who could not afford to hire a lawyer—often defendants who had been accused of political crimes—found their way to me.

The state of criminal law was especially grave after the 1979 revolution. The Islamic Republic had replaced

the secular criminal code Iran had followed under the shah with a system of Islamic law based on seventh-century readings of sharia, Islamic law. I still vividly remember the case that revealed to me the full extent of the system's dysfunction and cruelty.

My friend Shahla Sherkat, the country's foremost feminist editor and publisher, called to ask if I could offer any advice to the family of an eleven-year-old girl named Leila. One day, as Leila was picking wildflowers in the hills outside her village, three men snuck up and attacked her. The men raped her, struck her repeatedly on the head, and then threw her to her death over a nearby cliff. The local police arrested the men. One mysteriously hung himself in prison, and the court found the other two guilty of rape and murder. Because the laws at the time valued the life of a man convicted of murder more than that of a girl raped and tossed off a cliff, Leila's family was held responsible for paying for their executions. The family was unable to come up with the money, and the men were released. The Islamic Republic claimed that these laws were based on the principles of blood money in Islamic sharia, but I believed that not only were they unjust, they were a distortion of true Islamic legal principles.

In the course of seeking justice through the courts, Leila's family became destitute. Her mother had taken to sitting outside the courthouse each day in a white shroud, silently holding up a placard that described what had happened to her daughter. As I recounted more fully in Iran Awakening, I took on their case, and while I did not manage to secure anything like justice, their ordeal shaped the sort of legal response that became my second career. Though the judge in Leila's case accused me of contravening Islam in my arguments, I drew on Islamic law and principles to challenge him. I discovered that many judges in the Islamic Republic had little or no understanding of Islamic legal tenets, and also that many Iranian women had no idea of how egregiously the law discriminated against them. It was only when life dragged them to some dark crossroads—divorce, the death of a child, a fight over inheritance—that they realized how little status they had before the law.

I made a showcase out of Leila's case, writing articles and speaking out publicly, and extensive coverage in the Iranian press soon led to a public outcry. In one article I described how the criminal code around blood money holds that if a man suffers an injury that damages his testicles, he receives compensation equal to a woman's life. I posed the question this way: If a woman with a PhD is run over by a car and dies, and an illiterate thug gets his testicle hurt in a fight, the value of that woman's life and that thug's testicle are equal. Is this, I wrote, how the Islamic Republic regards its women?

For the first time since the revolution, the question of women's equality before the law came into the national spotlight. I saw then how sympathetic Iranian society was to such injustice and how powerful public outrage could be; more than anything else, it made the authorities pay attention. It was then that I started on the course that I follow to this day, seeking justice in the law through upholding the rights of those most vulnerable—women, children, dissidents, and minorities—and pushing for legal change on the battlefield of public sentiment.

The Islamic Republic has a myriad of shortcomings. It vests absolute power in an unelected supreme leader, harasses independent-minded clerics who challenge the religious basis of its severe Islamic rule, and pursues policies that are ideologically radical and detached from the national interests of the Iranian people. But like any regime committed to perpetuating its own power, it has on some occasions shown sensitivity to the condemnation of the international community and the brewing discontent of its own citizens. It is the system we have in place, and especially in those years, the 1990s and early 2000s, it made several reluctant adjustments to some of its most inhumane laws and policies, in response to the activism I and many colleagues in the field of human rights and the women's movement pursued. This course seemed the only path possible to follow, bar packing up and leaving. Although, in this era, Iranians began emigrating by the

thousands, both those who left and those who stayed behind remained fiercely proud of Iran the nation. We had been ruled by autocrats, kings, and now clerics; our history reached back thousands of years, all the way to Cyrus the Great, the Persian king who inscribed civilization's first human rights charter on a clay cylinder. I viewed myself as an inheritor of this history, of the great tradition of epic Persian poetry that I had read to my girls every night before bedtime. Like most Iranians, I was bitterly disappointed in Iran's present precisely because of the love and admiration I had for its past.

I received the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2003 for my efforts for democracy and human rights, and though you would think that this would have propelled my work in Iran and won me some grudging respect, it put me under even more pressure and scrutiny by the government. The Iranian state did everything it could to suppress the news of my award, forbidding the state radio and TV stations to so much as mention it and putting me under an even more severe news embargo. When a reporter asked President Mohammad Khatami, a reformist who was in power at the time, why he had not congratulated me, he responded, "This isn't such an important prize. It's only the Nobel in literature that really matters."

But as is always the case with Iran, there are ways to get around official censorship. News that matters finds its way to those who need to hear about it. I invited a Kurdish music group to perform at the Nobel awards ceremony. The Iranian regime has discriminated against its Kurdish minority for years, denying them the right to study in their own language and to maintain their Kurdish identity in public life. Iranian Kurds across the country watched this Kurdish group performing on satellite television and wept with pride at their inclusion. It was a small act, but symbolic, and the rumor spread among Iranian Kurds that I must be of Kurdish background. While the Iranian government sought to ignore my Nobel Prize—which ultimately recognized the work of human rights defenders trying to peacefully moderate the country from within—we had reached an age when satellite television and digital media meant it was no longer possible to keep a nation in the dark.

Others took notice of the prize as well, particularly the women of Iran, who had long been working for equal rights and recognition; they saw in the Nobel committee's decision a global support and awareness of their struggle. The chancellor of the all-female Alzahra University, Zahra Rahnavard, invited me to give a public lecture on women's legal status. Rahnavard, the first woman to head a university since the Islamic Revolution, was a distinguished scholar and activist. The world would come to know her in 2009, when she appeared on the front pages of newspapers as the wife of Mir Hossein Mousavi, the Green Movement opposition leader. That day in 2003, Rahnavard greeted me at the campus lecture theater, a tall building of yellow brick surrounded by wide lawns dotted with young women reading under sycamore trees. Hundreds of students were lining up outside for seats, though the room was already filled to capacity and buzzing with voices. We were discussing where to put the lectern when the doors at the back of the auditorium flew open and a mob of about thirty women, their heads covered by black chadors, poured in, shouting angrily.

"If Ebadi lectures here today, then tomorrow you're going to ask for George Bush!" they yelled, pushing toward the stage, which Rahnavard and I were standing in front of. They were clearly not students; they were vigilantes supported by the state. "This lecture is canceled!" they shouted. The students in the front rose and moved toward me, forming a protective ring. Rahnavard walked forward a few paces, her face etched with fury.

"This lecture is being held with the official permission of the university. You have no right to disrupt it," she said. "All of you must leave immediately."

One of the mob women sprang forward and reached for Rahnavard's chador. "You don't even deserve to have this chador on your head," she said, pulling violently at the fabric, which was pinned to Rahnavard's

manteau beneath.

The rest of her accomplices surged forward. The small band of students who had formed a circle around me started moving toward the back of the lecture hall. “Khanoum Ebadi,” they urged, “we have got to get you out of here—follow us.” They herded the chancellor and me out a back door and down a long corridor. The students led us into a small classroom and closed the door and barricaded it with chairs and tables. Soon we heard shouts and running, cries of “They’re here, they’re hiding in this room!” and then fists pounding against the door, trying to push it open. Rahnavard called the security services on her mobile phone.

“They’ve forced me to do something I never wanted to see happen. I don’t believe that police should set foot on university grounds, but there’s no other choice,” she said to me.

The police arrived and forcibly escorted the mob of women away. We agreed that canceling the lecture seemed the safest course, and I thanked the chancellor and her colleagues for the invitation and their quick wits as we’d faced attack. We shook hands warmly, and then two officers who had stayed behind walked me safely off university grounds. Nothing ever came of the incident, the authorities made no arrests, and we never found out exactly who had dispatched the women to disrupt my lecture that day. Rahnavard threatened to resign if the authorities didn’t find and prosecute those responsible. But they never did, and after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s election, she eventually stepped down herself or was fired—it was never clear. Though discussing women’s rights in Iran had always been fraught with difficulty, what happened there that day seemed the beginning of an altogether new kind of harassment and intimidation.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Thomas West:

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have far more or little spare time? Yep, you can choose the suitable activity with regard to spend your time. Any person spent their own spare time to take a stroll, shopping, or went to the actual Mall. How about open as well as read a book titled Until We Are Free: My Fight for Human Rights in Iran? Maybe it is for being best activity for you. You realize beside you can spend your time together with your favorite's book, you can smarter than before. Do you agree with it is opinion or you have different opinion?

Barbara Erickson:

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Heidi Garcia:

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