Shirin Ebadi

One Woman's Resistance, One Nation's Revolution

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> *"Human rights is a universal standard. It is a component of every religion and every civilization."*

Like many Iranians in 1979, Shirin Ebadi had hoped the revolution would bring something better. The regime that emerged gave her a lifetime's work proving it had not. Ebadi is an Iranian lawyer, jurist, and human rights activist who became the first Muslim woman and the first Iranian to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. Her life is a testament to how legal training can be transformed into a means of resistance and how an individual, despite being stripped of institutional power, can still use the law as a tool for justice. As she put it: "I have a tongue in my mouth, and I will not keep quiet until the day I die."



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Before the Revolution

Shirin Ebadi was born on 21 June 1947 in Hamadan, a city in northwestern Iran. Her father, Mohammad Ali Ebadi, was a distinguished jurist, a professor of commercial law, and a man she has consistently described as the defining influence on her understanding of justice. The family moved to Tehran when Shirin was an infant, and she grew up in a household where education was expected and intellectual engagement was ordinary. In 1965, she was admitted to the Faculty of Law at the University of Tehran. She followed this with a doctorate in private law, also from Tehran, awarded in 1971 with honours.

What might have seemed like a straightforward path towards a traditional legal career was, from the beginning, defined by a determination to go beyond its boundaries. In 1969, after passing the qualifying examinations for the Department of Justice, Ebadi was appointed as a judge – one of the first women in the history of the Iranian judiciary to hold this office. By 1975, she had risen to become the head of Branch 26 of the Tehran City Court, again the first woman to hold such a position and one of the youngest individuals ever to do so.

Dismissed, Demoted, Determined

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 ended all this overnight. The new theocratic leadership declared that Islam forbade women from serving as judges, so Ebadi along with all other female judges were removed from their post and reassigned to clerical duties. She found herself working as a secretary in the very courtroom over which she had previously presided.

The humiliation of this reversal was not lost on her. Ebadi and her colleagues protested, and were subsequently elevated, nominally, to the position of "legal expert" within the Justice Department. Unable to practise her profession in any meaningful way, she applied for early retirement. When she then applied

for a licence to practise as a lawyer, the Bar Association, which was under the management of the Judiciary at the time, refused her application for years. During the 1980s, she wrote books about children's rights and published articles analysing the legal framework of the Islamic Republic. It was not until 1992, after more than a decade of exclusion, that she was finally permitted to practise law.

Law as Resistance

> *"If you can't eliminate injustice, at least tell everyone about it."*

From the outset, Ebadi's legal practice was an act of deliberate opposition. She took on cases that few others would touch, representing political dissidents, victims of state violence and religious minorities like the Baha'i. One of her most significant cases was representing the family of Dariush Foruhar, an intellectual who was murdered alongside his wife in 1998 in a series of killings of Iranian writers and intellectuals known as the "Chain Murders", which were attributed to elements within the state's intelligence services. While researching the cases in the Tehran courthouse, she came across a transcript of a conversation between a government minister and a hired assassin. Her own name was on the list:

"The next person to be killed is Shirin Ebadi." She read the line repeatedly, she later recalled, before quietly rearranging her papers and continuing her work. Ebadi gathered and distributed evidence implicating government officials in the killings, an act for which she was imprisoned for three weeks in 2000 on charges of "spreading falsehoods against the Islamic Republic." Her sentence was later suspended, but she was barred from practising law for five years and fined.

Her institutional work ran alongside her casework. In 1994, she co-founded the Society for Protecting the Rights of the Child, one of the first NGOs of its kind in Iran, which sought to improve the legal framework governing children's welfare in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2001, she co-founded the Defenders of Human Rights Center, offering pro bono legal representation to political prisoners and their families and raising public awareness of human rights abuses. She also participated in the Million Signatures Campaign, a grassroots movement demanding an end to legal discrimination against women in Iranian law.

Denied a courtroom, Ebadi created one on the page. During this period, she wrote several books, including The Rights of the Child (1994), History and Documentation of Human Rights in Iran (2000) and The Rights of Women (2002), as well as more than a dozen others. Each one was a legal argument in book form, documenting specific violations and proposing specific reforms, written by someone who had been barred from making those arguments anywhere else.

A Nobel Prize in a Country That Despised It

On 10 October 2003, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded Shirin Ebadi the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts for democracy and human rights, with particular recognition of her work on behalf of women and children. She was the first Iranian and the first Muslim woman to receive the award.

The Iranian government's response was revealing. President Khatami, himself considered a reformist, dismissed the prize as "not very important". Conservative newspapers described it as an attack on Islam by the West. The authorities did not organise a public celebration. During the Oslo ceremony and at the press conference abroad, Ebadi appeared without a headscarf as a deliberate statement that, in Iran, her headscarf was imposed by law rather than a personal choice, before wearing one again on her return to Tehran, where the law required it. In Tehran, she received a warm welcome from crowds who understood the significance of the prize.

Her legal and political philosophy was based on the idea that the fight for women's rights in Iran was not against Islam itself, but rather against a specific interpretation of it. As she has put it in many interviews: "I am against patriarchy, not Islam".

Confiscation and Exile

The years following the Nobel Prize brought escalating pressure. In 2008, the Iranian authorities forcibly

closed the Defenders of Human Rights Center, citing "propaganda against the state". Law offices were raided, and her personal property was confiscated. While attending a conference in Spain in January 2009, Ebadi assessed the accelerating persecution of human rights activists and made the decision not to return. She has remained in exile in the United Kingdom ever since.

The Iranian government's retaliation did not stop with her departure. Her husband was beaten and arrested. Her sister was detained. Her bank accounts were frozen due to fabricated tax charges. While Ebadi was abroad, the regime set a honey trap for her husband and forced him to make a televised statement denouncing his wife. The marriage, subjected to relentless state pressure, eventually ended in divorce. Then, in November 2009, Iranian authorities raided a bank vault and confiscated Ebadi's Nobel Peace Prize medal and diploma, the physical embodiment of the world's recognition of her work, in an act without precedent in the history of the Nobel Prize. The authorities also brought charges against her in the Revolutionary Court, a proceeding she refused to recognise.

From London, Ebadi rebuilt what had been destroyed. In 2012, she established the Centre for Defenders of Human Rights in London, thereby continuing the work of the Tehran organisation from exile. She has published monthly bilingual reports on human rights violations in Iran, delivered lectures at universities across the world, and maintained a consistent public presence on Iranian affairs. From her exile, Ebadi also watched successive waves of protest wash over Iran since 2009, including the Green Movement, the 2019 uprising – and then, Zan, Zendegi, Azadi in 2022, the slogan that turned four decades of her legal arguments into a street chant.

"Woman, Life, Freedom"

In September 2022, the young Iranian woman Mahsa Amini died in police custody, her alleged crime being the improper wearing of the hijab. The protests that swept Iran following her death gave Ebadi's decades of work a new context and a new urgency. The movement's slogan, Zan, Zendegi, Azadi – Woman, Life, Freedom, resonated directly with the issues she had been raising since the 1980s.

Ebadi expressed her unequivocal support for the protesters and provided a legal analysis of the challenges they faced. In November 2022, she addressed the UN Security Council, urging the international community to hold the Iranian government accountable for gender apartheid, a system in which a woman's life is legally worth half that of a man, and two women's testimony is equivalent to one man's. Describing the movement as both cultural and political, she argued that it marks a generational shift in how Iranians understand the relationship between gender, religion and the state. The new protest slogan was, she argued, a demand for life made by the woman who sustain it.

That the generational shift comes at a cost, is visible through the fate if Narges Mohammadi, the imprisoned activist and 2023 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, with whom Ebadi co-founded the Defenders of Human Rights Centre.

The View from Exile

At the end of 2025, another eruption occurred. The December 2025 protests began in Tehran's bazaar, triggered by an acute currency collapse and the spectre of renewed inflation. However, they quickly shed their economic framing and once again became a demand for an end to the Islamic Republic. Security forces responded with lethal force. This was followed by a nationwide internet blackout, which Ebadi publicly described not as a technical failure, but as a deliberate tactic of concealment, warning that killing, detention, and organised concealment were taking place on a scale that the outside world could not yet measure.

Her legal and political analysis of Iran's current situation is more definitive than ever before. In January 2026, she described the protests as revealing a decisive shift in which many Iranians had concluded that the establishment must end and that repression no longer achieved its purpose precisely because people had nothing left to lose. She added that there was no hope left for the Islamic Republic. She called

for its overthrow and specified the legal form it should be a referendum conducted under UN supervision, in which Iranians would determine their own political future. That demand is now taking an institutional form after she accepted the chairmanship of a transitional justice committee established by exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi in March 2026.

Sharp Legal Critique

What distinguishes Ebadi's position from simple opposition politics is its legal precision. Ebadi does not call for foreign military intervention, a position she has held consistently since before the Iraq War, when she stated that democracy cannot be imported through cluster bombs. Instead, she calls for the international legal framework, including the UN, to serve its proper function as a guarantee through which people can exercise self-determination. The mechanism she demands is a legal one, even if the path to it runs through popular uprising.

Equally central to her current analysis is a sharp critique not only of Tehran alone, but also of Western governments. For decades, she has argued, the international community has treated Iran's nuclear programme as the primary problem and human rights as a secondary concern. Her formulation is unambiguous stating that any government that chooses to negotiate with the Islamic Republic bears a legal and moral obligation to place human rights violations at the top of that agenda, not as a footnote. The deaths of protesters, the execution of juvenile offenders, documented in a June 2025 letter she addressed directly to the head of UNICEF, condemning that organisation's silence in the face of ongoing child rights violations are, in her view, partly enabled by a world order that has repeatedly decided they are acceptable costs. This is the work of both a jurist and an activist through which she identifies legal obligations, documents their breach and insists on accountability.

The Longest Case

What Shirin Ebadi's career demonstrates, above all, is that legal training is not merely a professional credential. It is a way of seeing the world and one that does not switch off when the courtroom is closed, the licence revoked or the border crossed. Stripped of her judgeship, she found a wider reach. Driven into exile, she continued the work from London with the same methodical insistence she had brought to the Tehran courts.

What distinguishes her contribution to international human rights law is the intellectual framework she advanced: that universal human rights standards are compatible with and indeed demanded by a properly understood Islam, and that discriminatory laws derive their authority not from religion but from political power masquerading as religious necessity. This has shaped how reformers within Iran and across the Muslim world have engaged with questions of women's rights and legal equality.

Shirin Ebadi has spent more than four decades insisting that a different Iran is legally possible, morally necessary, and historically inevitable. A generation has grown up inside Iran that no longer needs to be convinced. She says she will go home. The question for her is no longer whether, but when.

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