

Iran: Women are terrorized

by Ina Tin, editor of AmnestyNytt, AI Norway's magazine (translated by Laila Belle)

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Shirin Ebadi is fighting for a new interpretation of Islamic Shari'a laws. In the opinion of the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, the interpretation of the Shari'a permitting discrimination of women is incorrect. She emphasises that women are protesting against these laws. As a lawyer and a human rights defender in Iran, she is giving priority to working towards changing this interpretation of Islam.

"A dynamic interpretation of Islam will accept women's rights, democracy and human rights. We are fighting to prove that Islam is not against women. We live in a patriarchal culture that is against women and therefore dominated by an incorrect interpretation of Islam. You know, most men would oppose any feministic interpretation, but that is not important. We have to do our job even if it puts us at risk. We have to take the challenge. It will not be easy, I know, but it is our job.

"Women in Iran are terrorized. We are facing discriminatory laws as well as family violence. These laws represent the biggest problem. If laws were just, violence would diminish. That is why the fight against laws that discriminate is given priority."

She says that the laws are not adapted to today's society. Today, 63% of students in Iran are women, yet many laws violate human rights because they systematically discriminate against women.

"A man may have four wives; two female witnesses make up for one male witness; in compensation cases, the price of a woman's life is worth half the price of a man's; filing for a divorce is more difficult for a woman than for a man. One type of violence against women is forbidden, but another type is permitted", she explains.

"If a woman is killed on the street or in the house, the murderer may be prosecuted. The problem is that such violence is rarely reported to the police. If, however, the woman is killed by her husband because she is unfaithful or is caught in bed with another man, the murderer will not be punished."

She says, with a sigh, that it is difficult for a professor of law to teach her subject.

"How does one create respect and understanding for laws like these?"

She believes that there are many people in Iran who would welcome a new interpretation of Islamic law.

"It is evident that the government creates many problems for those of us who act. Some of us are in prison; others are in exile and others are prohibited from speaking in public. Take me, for instance -- I am not allowed to speak at universities, nor am I allowed to receive honorary doctorates abroad. But that is not important, the authorities do their job and we do ours," she says.

She says that she thinks the government offers some degree of protection against family violence, but it is of no help to those who have actually experienced violence.

"We have no social help. If a husband beats his wife and she reports him for violence, the incident will be investigated. He will get a fine and the wife will be allowed to file for a divorce. But what can a divorcee with small children do -- no job and no income, no house and no social help? It is not sufficient for the authorities to punish a violent husband. In reality, the woman has no alternative but to stay married."

She does not give an opinion as to whether all religious laws should be put aside and human rights confirmed as the one and only common basis of values. She argues, however, that Islam gives people the right to change the laws according to time and place.

"Let me give you one example: the Koran states that all Muslims are expected to fast, not to drink or eat from sunrise to sunset, during the month of Ramadan. In the Middle East, it is easy to fast, but what about on the North Pole? Six months of daylight and six months of dark night -- if a Muslim were to follow the rules of fast, he or she would die. One has to make a compromise. By dividing the day in three, you are expected to fast for eight hours daily. We call them secondary laws; laws rooted in the Koran, but adapted to time and place. Many laws have already been changed like that."

"Amnesty International (AI) has friends all over the world," she says, voicing her support for AI's campaign to stop violence against women. "The campaign is important because women's rights are violated all over the world, in particular in the East".

She says that she believes AI's campaign will make a difference to women in the Muslim world where they face serious problems. However, she points out that she also thinks, in order to succeed in Muslim countries, it would be very useful to obtain support from Muslim clerics for the campaign. She says that she thinks new changes will be made when enough people call for them.

"We have had some success, but we need more changes. I am optimistic. We will succeed if we stand together," the Iranian Peace Prize Laureate concludes.

Editor's note: The Islamic Human Rights Commission has visited the International Secretariat of AI. Ayatollah Bojnourdi, the head of the Imam Khomeini Center for Islamic Studies, has given his support to the organization's work.

Further information:

Urgent Action: **Iran: Fear of imminent execution/fear of flogging, Leyla M**

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde130482004>

Amnesty International Norway demonstrates in front of the Iranian embassy in Oslo on behalf of Iranian Leyla M. (text in Norwegian)

<http://www.amnesty.no/web.nsf/pages/49E69A5F8C5764B5C1256F6D003C7587>