

**Anna Lindh Lecture at Lund University (Sweden) on 29 September 2009
Delivered by Dr Shirin Ebadi**

A few words of thanks by Ambassador Hans Corell

Allow me in my capacity as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law to express on behalf of all of us our deepest thanks to Nobel Peace Prize Winner Shirin Ebadi for coming to visit us here in Lund and to deliver this year's Anna Lindh Lecture. Shirin Ebadi choose to address the topic "Barriers to the Advancement of Human Rights in the World and in Iran".

When Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo on 10 December 2003, the Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee congratulated her warmly, expressing the hope that the prize would also inspire changes in her beloved country, Iran, as well as in many other parts of the world where people need to hear her clear voice. He emphatically stated that no society can be called civilized if the rights of women and children fail to be respected and furthermore that state and religion should be separate.

In her Nobel Lecture in Oslo on that day, Shirin Obadi responded:

Undoubtedly, my selection will be an inspiration to the masses of women who are striving to realize their rights, not only in Iran but throughout the region – rights taken away from them through the passage of history. This selection will make women in Iran, and much further afield, believe in themselves. Women constitute half of the population of every country. To disregard women and bar them from active participation in political, social, economic and cultural life would in fact be tantamount to depriving the entire population of every society of half its capability. The patriarchal culture and the discrimination against women, particularly in the Islamic countries, cannot continue for ever.

Later in her address she went on to say:

The discriminatory plight of women in Islamic states, too, whether in the sphere of civil law or in the realm of social, political and cultural justice, has its roots in the patriarchal and male-dominated culture prevailing in these societies, not in Islam. This culture does not tolerate freedom and democracy, just as it does not believe in the equal rights of men and women, and the liberation of women from male domination (fathers, husbands, brothers ...), because it would threaten the historical and traditional position of the rulers and guardians of that culture.

Interestingly, a couple of years ago, I had the privilege of discussing this issue – whether these habits had its roots in Islam or were simply custom – with learned Moslem colleagues, all of them men, in Egypt. They gave me exactly the same answer. It is tradition rather than religion.

In her presentation Shirin Ebadi said that there are some who believe that human rights criteria have been drafted based on Western, in particular European criteria and she also made references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is therefore important to note that this Declaration that today applies with the force of customary international law was drafted also with the participation of delegates from the Moslem community, including Iran. All States representing the Moslem community voted in favour of the Declaration when it was adopted by the General Assembly in 1948 except Saudi Arabia that choose to abstain.

Shirin Ebadi also made reference to the Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in Cairo 1990. I remember being sent by my government to Teheran in the early 1990s to discuss human rights with high officials of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One of my interlocutors during that visit was Ayatollah Jaafari, who was one of the authors of the Cairo Declaration. I remember expressing my deep concern, asking him why he had participated in an exercise that might drive a wedge between Moslems and the rest of the world. Shirin Ebadi is so right when she points to the confusion that would be the result if it was accepted that followers of different religions would start producing declarations of human rights of their own with various contents.

It is important that all of us, and I turn in particular to the students, the coming generation, defend the integrity of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Another issue in Shirin Ebadi's lecture that should be highlighted is the criticism of the United Nations and the weak performance of the Human Rights Council. This is a very serious matter, and it is clear that UN Member States have to improve considerably in this field.

This means that the United Nations, which is an intergovernmental organisation, must be strengthened. The only way to achieve this is that the governments who represent the Member States are truly legitimate. In other words, they must base their authority on a democratic process at the national level.

Another element in Shirin Ebadi's lecture that I would like to highlight is the attempt by States, she specifically referred to her own country Iran, to describe accusations of violation of human rights as interference in the internal affairs of a country. This is no longer an acceptable way of reacting to such criticism. As a matter of fact, according to long-term established practice under international law, criticism of human rights performance in a particular country is not regarded as interference in the internal affairs of that particular country. Reference can be made to the practice under existing treaty law, to the recommendations of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 (A/CONF.157/23 of 12 July 1993) and the response by the General Assembly (A/RES/48/121 of 20 December 1993).

Most importantly, we must apply the same human rights standards everywhere. From this perspective we must sadly note that there have been violations of human rights also in the Western world, not least in the so-called "war against terrorism". We should not forget this. To criticise others for human rights violations with legitimacy one must look to one's own record first.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In Oslo, both the Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee and Shirin Ebadi referred to the rich heritage in the Iranian literature. They quoted the poets Rumi and Saadi. Allow me therefore on this occasion to quote one of my favourite poems by Omar Khayyám. In one of his poems in Rubáiyát, Omar Khayyám compares the world to a battered Caravanserai. The verse reminds us how the Earth – the battered Caravanserai – is being ruled by one master after another, not necessarily in the interest of humankind. And each time a ruler “goes his way”, the Caravanserai is left – still more battered:

Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai,
Whose Portals are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultán after Sultán with his Pomp
Abode his destined Hour, and went his way.

The question is how much more of this the Earth and humankind can endure.

But we must look forward with optimism. We can make a difference in the future if we learn from the wisdom of earlier generations. As I have pointed out on many occasions before, the problem is that it is so difficult to transfer wisdom from one generation to another.

Let me say to the students in particular: What you have heard today is something that you should carry with you and reflect upon in the future. There is also a very special lesson that Shirin Ebadi can teach us: the importance of standing up for one's opinion (in Swedish: *civilkurage*). In standing up for her opinion, Shirin Ebadi has given voice to so many in need of support.

Remember also Shirin Ebadi's message in her Nobel Lecture about equal rights of men and women, and the liberation of women from male domination. What troubles me is that it seems that the tradition of male domination has started creeping back into our society at a time when finally the position of women has started to improve. You should keep a watchful eye on this and make every effort to counteract such tendencies.

We should also think of Shirin Ebadi's own country Iran. To an outside observer the latest development in that country is mind-boggling. But there are also signs of reason. More and more voices are heard that question what is happening in the country. Let us hope that reason will be the lodestar to the future leadership of this great nation so rich in history, culture and knowledge.

Let me now end with the following quote from Shirin Ebadi's Nobel Lecture:

If the 21st century wishes to free itself from the cycle of violence, acts of terror and war, and avoid repetition of the experience of the 20th century – that most disaster-ridden century of humankind, there is no other way except by understanding and putting into practice every human right for all mankind, irrespective of race, gender, faith, nationality or social status.

Dear Shirin Ebadi, allow me on behalf of all of us to thank you warmly for your inspiring, courageous and thoughtful presentation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This brings us to the close of this ceremony in memory of Anna Lindh.

Quod bonum, felix faustumque sit! Dixi!