

The Hum Podcast

Episode 34: "If I Die, I Did Something"

[Theme music fades in]

Shaparak: When a person doesn't like your look, he can come easily, and insult you, and threaten you to call the police, those morality police. When they catch you, you're done. You're going to face having fine, or having a trial, and spending one or two nights in jail, and that's it. Constant violence, constant fear. It has to stop at one point.

Gilad: You're listening to The Hum.

[Music decreases in volume]

Gilad: This episode is brought to you by UNHCR, the UN refugee agency. UNHCR was created in 1950 following the Second World War to help millions of Europeans who had fled or lost their homes. Today, the organization remains committed to protecting the rights and well-being of millions around the world forced to flee violence, persecution, war or disaster. UNHCR provides life-saving assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless people, and those displaced within their own countries, many of whom have nowhere else to turn. The organization works tirelessly to ensure that everyone everywhere has the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge. To learn more about how you can support UNHCR and its efforts to build better, brighter futures for those forced from their homes, please visit www.unhcr.ca.

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Gilad: We're joined here today by Shaparak Shajarizadeh, who's originally from Iran and is a mother, and is also an activist pushing back against Iran's mandatory law, which forces women to wear hijabs. Her activism landed her in prison a number of times and Shaparak eventually fled from Iran to Turkey and is now living in Toronto with her son, where they are both seeking asylum. You know what, Simona, if all of this isn't impressive enough, Shaparak was also recognized by the BBC as one of the 100 inspiring and most influential women from around the world in 2018.

Simona: Amazing.

Gilad: Thanks so much for joining us. For those of you that don't know, can you guide us or tell us a little bit more about the history of the hijab in Iran? For anyone

who's born after 1979, they might not realize that there was a time in Iran where wearing the hijab was actually super uncommon.

Shaparak: Yeah. First, I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity. I really appreciate it. I was born before the revolution, before 1979. When I talk about hijab or forced mandatory hijab or forced dress code, it's just lots of memories of my youth. At the time, when I was going to school. At the time, I was going to high school because for me it's just the suppression on women. As I got older and started reading about hijab, about women's rights, eventually, for me, bearing this kind of pressure and tolerate this law was getting harder and harder because at some point, I realize it's not about being a Muslim or Islam. When you go back to the history of humans and to ancient civilization, the dress code for women goes back to those era 4,000 years ago.

Shaparak: The worst time for women was, I guess it was 2,500 years ago. From the first civilizations when the men got the power, because of the wars and being the ones who can help the community to survive, they decided that women should stay and take care of the kids and the rules came out, and one of them was dress code for women for different social levels in society. It's not about just Islam. Like lots of, I don't know, lots of ideology, Islam had this rule. For me, I'm not against any kind of religion, but for me, it's a sign of sexism in every culture, in every religion. When they say, if you're a man, you can do this, you should do this; if you're a woman, you should do this, it's a sign of sexism.

Shaparak: As we know, now we know that there are lots of people who we can't put them in the order of male, female sex. We are all human beings and have the right to be the same, to have the equal rights. When you realize you have this right, bearing it is so hard. This is one part. The other part is we Iranian women facing lots of violence every day, every day in the streets. If you have special police officers with the special cars that they call it morality police or Gasht-e Ershad. They are there to tell you what to do. You're an adult woman and there is a guy who has the right to tell you with violence, to tell you what to do. They arrest women all the time. They insult you, slut-shaming you every time when they see you.

Shaparak: And other than that, there are other non-authorized officers. They call it Basij. They are trained in mosques. Anybody can be one of them, and you cannot realize if he is a Basij or not, but anybody can come to you and insult you, and tell you what to do or what not to do. It's not just covering your head or covering your body. It can be the color of your dress, if it's colorful or flashy. It's the type of the heels of your shoes. It can be your nail polish, your makeup. When a person doesn't like your look, he can come easily, and insult you, and threaten you to call that the police, those morality police. When they catch you, you're done. You're going to face having fine, or having a trial and spending one or two

nights in jail and that's it. Constant violence, constant fear, and it has to stop at one point.

Gilad: Can you walk us through your childhood in Iran a little bit? I'm curious to know what was it like growing up as a young girl or as an adolescent in Iran and obviously women's rights is so important to you that you can hear it in the way you're speaking. At what point did women's rights really become a part of who you are?

Shaparak: I can remember some scene of my childhood. Yeah, I can remember my mother. She didn't have to wear hijab, but in that time, I was a kid. I was doing the things that they told me to do. From the age of seven, girls have to wear hijab, six or seven, when you are going to school, to primary school. You have to wear hijab. In Islam, it's at the age of nine but in Iran is at the age of six when you're going to school. We were kids, and we had to listen to them. For example, for first year, it was the first years of revolution. First year, it was just having a scarf. The second year there was another rule. Instead of leggings, we had to wear pants. The year after that when I was in third grade, they said, "You're not allowed to wear jeans because it's something from ..." It was chaos between US and Iran and everything. It comes from USA, so you're not allowed to wear jeans. We had to wear, I don't know, normal pants, and we just listened to them. When I go back to that time, it was just saying what to do, what not to do. I was banned from going to school in high school because of wearing white socks. Now the girls are allowed to wear white socks, but in that era wearing something white in your uniform at school was against the law. For me, my first civil disobedience act was wearing white socks at the school.

Simona: Did you make that choice yourself? Did you just wake up and say, "I'm going to wear white socks today?"

Shaparak: In that time, I didn't know it's civil disobedience. I was just so stubborn. I didn't want to listen to them. For example, I remember I was called to the office at high school and they said, "You're wearing white trainers." They called me to the office and I told them, "My old trainers are torn apart, and my dad don't have money to buy those black trainers. This is the only pairs I have." I lied because I just want to wear my favorite trainers. That's it. I wanted to do something to please myself. For me, in that time, wearing those white trainers was so important, and that's the issue for lots of women and men in our country. For example, drinking alcohol is illegal, but almost everyone ...

Gilad: Behind closed doors.

Shaparak: Behind closed doors. Iranian do anything underground. We have wild parties. We have alcohol, we have everything. The thing that was bothering me, doing

everything in hiding make people big liars. Iranian people, unfortunately, we Iranian people, are used to having double lives, are used to hide who they are because that's the way they live for 40 years, not saying your beliefs, not showing the way you live.

Simona: What was the day like when you decided that you were going to leave the house without your hijab?

Shaparak: Actually, I was reading about reading or watching movies about suffragette for a long time. For me, it was like we don't have the main element of supporting the activists because for lots of years, there were female activists. There were lawyers. There were journalists who were trying to make some changes, but we could see they weren't successful. At some point, all of them were stopped. The journalists, the lawyers, they would end up in jail or leaving the country or being silent. I was thinking because they don't have the support of the normal, ordinary women, they are outnumbered. I was waiting for a sign. At the first eight weeks of White Wednesday campaign, I guess it was second week, one of my friends randomly send me a video clip of a girl and two young men talking about White Wednesday campaign.

Shaparak: They were inviting other people who come forward and if they are not happy with compulsory hijab, show it with wearing white. It was like, I don't know, it was like calling for me. You're not happy. You can say, you can be your voice. That day I didn't have anything white, so I went shopping, I had some white scarf. I was so excited. I called all of my friends or texted them in our groups, in social media, come join me. We're going to wear white on Wednesday because we don't wear hijab, so show it. Show that we don't care about this law, but I was alone. Nobody was with me. None of my friends. At the first months, I was disappointed, but I started wearing white.

Shaparak: I sent the journalist, the campaigner who started this campaign, Masih Alinejad, my videos and my clips, and started talking about my feelings. I realized I had a lot to say in those one minute clips. I'm a woman. I'm an adult, and I'm also a human being. I can decide for my life and afterlife. Eventually, women started not having that wide shot on their head and we were having it on our shoulders. I told you before that, I wasn't care about my scarf. Most of the time I didn't have hijab, but I had it on my shoulder, but actually when I wanted to go out of the house, I put my scarf on my shoulder, and it made me very happy. Before that, I was careless, but after that it was like, I am doing something.

Simona: You're making the choice.

Shaparak: I'm making the choice. Little by little, the threats started. I was getting lots of threats online, but I didn't care. I made that video and I invited the other

women. I told them, "Instead of wearing white, instead of not having hijab, go and stand somewhere and having your white shawls and scarves on a stick, and show them that we're not going to be silent anymore." I was active for almost more than two months. Then one day, I got arrested.

Gilad: Yeah. We mentioned at the beginning of the show that your work did get you in trouble a number of times and you were imprisoned, I believe, up to three times in Iran, if that's correct.

Shaparak: I got arrested three times, but I went to prison twice.

Gilad: Can you tell us a little bit more about what that experience was like for you being in prison and just an honest question, were you ever worried that this form of activism, it's so brave, it's so courageous, were you ever worried that it would, it could get you killed?

Shaparak: I don't know. I was expected to be arrested. In that time, my feeling was there are lots of women's activists inside jail, and I'm going to be one of them, and it's going to be an interesting experience for my life. I'm going to do it. Every time that my husband or my family were against it, I was telling themselves, that's the way it is. I'm not going to be silent, but when they arrested me, the first thing I realized that there is no law and there's no justice. They would come up with all the accusations. For example, the second day of my arrest I was accused of being a spy, seriously, they told me that because of my trips to other countries and mostly Europe. I didn't know there is conspiracy behind those questions.

Shaparak: They asked me about my religion, my religious beliefs. In that time, I was naive. I didn't know it's against law to talk to ask me about my religious beliefs. Even in our country, it's against law during interrogation. I didn't know that they would use my answers against me to come up with other accusations. The investigator just want to label me with other things so he could give me more sentences. I don't know. The second day I realized that I'm in a big trouble because of being honest with them, so I was accused of being a spy for other countries. The second day when I realized I'm in danger most, I was accused of acting against national security.

Simona: Treason.

Shaparak: Yeah, treason. Yeah. I told them, "I'm not going to cooperate any more. I have a lawyer. I gave you the number of my lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh. I'm not going to talk to you without my lawyer." I knew that was my right, but I was beaten up.

Simona: You were beaten? Okay.

Shaparak: Badly, badly, badly. I was physically hurt, but mostly I was devastated. I was humiliated. They sent me to the first trial. There was no trace of my lawyer. Then they send me to jail in a solitary confinement. I knew that wasn't right. I knew that solitary confinement is for people who are under investigation. I didn't do anything wrong and all for the people who get into trouble inside jail, I was just an entry and I had to go to, I don't know, quarantine section, something like that.

Shaparak: I was sent to a solitary confinement and after two days I told them, "You're either taking me to the normal cell with other women and give me the access to my lawyer because I was banned from calling anybody." When it didn't go anywhere, I decided to be on hunger strike. After five days, they send me to court and accept my bail. There was no trail of my documents in any courtroom. They just told my family, "There is no documents," and they told my husband, "We don't know where she is."

Simona: Kind of want to go on two things that you mentioned. You've been to prison. You've been hurt, you've been beaten. How did your family kind of outside deal with your arrest? Then you mentioned something about your lawyer Nasrin who has been in the news recently, because she just got a 38-year sentence passed down for her human rights work and her support of women's rights in Iran.

Shaparak: Even for me, the sentence, Nasrin's sentence is shocking. If you see the accusations, I don't know if you've seen them or not, being a member of a human rights organization, it's not a crime. Being a member of a group that opposed execution, it's not a crime. Defend the women's activists like me is not a crime. They just try to accuse her of many things, but if you go through all of them, none of them is against the law. Even in my country, and I don't know if you've seen it or not, my name is in the accusations. They accused her of lying about my case. I'm telling you everything she told media. Everything she told public about my case was the truth.

Shaparak: Actually, in all the things about my case, in my trials, she couldn't do anything for me because she wasn't allowed to see me. She wasn't allowed to talk to me. Just at the day of the court, we could see each other, and we were banned from talking to each other. The judge said, "You can talk to each other after the trial. You can give us your statement." They asked me some questions and they, they told me, "You have to answer the questions but not talking, not consulting with your lawyer." I knew that wasn't right. I had the right to consult my lawyer. What's the point of having a lawyer? To consult you in these matters. The only thing she could do for us was telling the public about our case. That was the only thing she did. She has a very strong personality and both time when I was in jail I was in hunger strike, and I was so weak, but just seeing her made me strong.

Simona: You are now in Canada waiting for your asylum to be processed. What was that transition like for you coming here with your son?

Shaparak: It's very hard. It's very hard. I'm away from all the things I was attached to. The first thing, when I had to get out because I realized I was under surveillance, and they were watching me. I was afraid to go to the airport, so I decided to get out of the country illegally. That night, it was midnight when I crossed the border. It was so frightening. When I look back to those heels ... at night, I didn't know if I have the chance to see my beautiful country and lots of things I was attached to even now in Toronto. I miss the restaurants that I used to go.

Simona: The food here is not that great.

Shaparak: No, no, no. It's not the food. They were the spots that I was familiar with, the atmosphere, the everything.

Simona: It's your home.

Shaparak: Yeah, it was my home, my family. I don't know. At the same time, I am dealing with lots of backlashes from lots of Iranians because of me going out. I don't know. They're not happy that I'm out.

Simona: That you left.

Shaparak: Yeah, that I left the country. A lot had happened during last year, and it's very hard. I was happily married. My husband is a great guy, but a lot had happened and now there's nothing between us. I lost my marriage. It's so hard. A lot had happened, but at the same time I'm happy. If I die, I did something, but it's been a very hard year and in Canada I have to find work. I had to find work, I had to settle down, and it's so hard.

Gilad: You should be super proud of yourself though. It takes a very courageous and strong person, a strong woman to do all the things that you've done.

Shaparak: I feel guilty leaving behind my fellow, I don't know, my fellow friends, the other soldiers with me. I tell myself that was my choice. I had the right to choose how to leave, but at the same time the feeling, the guilt and I don't know.

Gilad: On one hand, though, your son doesn't have to worry about his mom being taken away in handcuffs anymore, and that's a strong and very important decision that you made.

- Simona: I think a challenge when you're a human rights activist and a mother, it's two very polar opposites sometimes. Your cause is your baby and then your baby is your baby.
- Shaparak: Yeah, it's too hard. Right now, there are lots of women risking their lives in Iran and some of them are my friends now. When I see them, I just call them and say, "I wish I was there with you." Because being in the field of them doing something, now I don't know if you've seen it or not, there are some women going to public transportation talking about Nasrin. These are the women who did the same for me when I was in jail, and now they are my best friends. I wish I was there talking about Nasrin and making awareness inside Iran about human rights.
- Gilad: Thank you so much for joining us. I actually had one last question for others who, myself included, and Simona and all of our listeners, anyone who's interested in helping support this struggle for women's rights and women's freedom in Iran, what can be done here in Canada to support your story, to support Nasrin, and to help fight because not all causes have to be fought on the ground? They can also be done from other parts. What can we do from over here?
- Shaparak: Canada, one of the countries that consider as a free country, last week I was in Women's March in 9th of March. I saw lots of women from different countries, lots of people from different countries. Some of the comments, some of the things they were saying were political, but they were free to express themselves. They were free to ask the government to take care of child support or women's issues or immigrants issues, even Muslims. They were talking about their rights, and they were free to express themselves.
- Shaparak: I also want the government, if they are claiming to support human rights, don't be silent about other countries, that they are violating human rights, including Iran. As we know, Iranian government had lots of people in Toronto, that they are supporting Iranian government. They are doing their best to influence on the government to be ignorant about human rights in Iran. I'm not asking Canada to be involved in political issues, but I'm asking Canada and other countries to care about human rights. I'm expecting the government at least to have a statement about Nasrin because all other countries, not all other countries, some countries, they issued some statements about Nasrin. I'm expecting Canada to do the same and also make awareness about women's right.
- Gilad: Shaparak, thank you for joining us. We're interested to learn more about what you're doing, and we'll stay updated on all this stuff.

[Theme music fades in]

Shaparak: Thank you so much for giving me the support.

Simona: Thank you for joining us.

Gilad: My name is Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: This is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

[Music fades out]

Gilad: If you enjoyed this podcast, help us make more of them by donating whatever you can. Visit us online at jayu.ca/donate.