

# Democracy and women's rights

Nobel Peace prize winner Dr. Shirin Ebadi speaks about equality and justice

**February 2008** – “We cannot claim to be a democracy and at the same time deprive half the population of rights.” Iranian human rights lawyer, and the first Iranian and first Muslim Nobel Peace Prize winner, Dr. Shirin Ebadi spoke to an audience of nearly 800 this morning, describing the status of women and the movement towards equality in Iran, and the world. Dr. Ebadi was in Vancouver to support West Coast LEAF's work advancing women's rights in the context of the law. She was the keynote speaker at the 21<sup>st</sup> annual West Coast LEAF Equality Breakfast.

In much the same way that she criticizes not Islam itself but the current interpretation of Islam for the inequalities of women in her country, Dr. Ebadi struck a balance during her talk by clarifying that it is not men that are against human rights, but “the wrong social structure that is against human rights.”

In remarks earlier this week she stressed the need for state-legislated equal rights: “One country, one law”. She also advocated a “re-interpretation” rather than rejection of Islam. While critical of discriminatory social policies in her own country under Islam, she made the link to the range of positions within any religion: “In Canada, homosexual marriage is allowed by some Christian churches and not by others – but they all believe in Jesus.”

Dr. Ebadi was invited to Vancouver by West Coast LEAF to highlight and compliment West Coast LEAF's ongoing work around religious freedoms and women's rights. West Coast LEAF Executive Director Alison Brewin says, “Women's equality and religion do not have to conflict; however, when religion is used as a tool to limit women's freedom, the law, particularly the Charter, has a role in addressing that lack of freedom. We need to find solutions that respect equality rights and provide freedom for religious beliefs and practices.”

The breakfast was held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. Each year West Coast LEAF hosts an Equality Breakfast to celebrate International Women's Day and to promote its work.

Dr. Ebadi is also scheduled to speak at the University of Victoria on March 3<sup>rd</sup> as part of the President's Distinguished Lecture series.

## For more information, contact:

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West Coast LEAF (Legal Education and Action Fund for women), a registered charity, was founded in 1985 to advance women's equality in BC and Canada. LEAF and West Coast LEAF founders had a vision: that Canadian law would one day reflect full equality for women. As a non-profit organization, West Coast LEAF relies on support from donors to carry out its programs. Women in British Columbia and across Canada benefit from our advances in law and success in the courts.

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