

Interview with Shohreh Bayat - questions by Mark Rivlin

Shohreh Bayat is an Iranian chess arbiter and holds the WFM title. An International FIDE Arbiter, she was chief arbiter of the [Women's World Chess Championship 2020](#). Shohreh claimed asylum in the UK in February 2020 and is now an arbiter under the auspices of the ECF. She received the [International Women of Courage Award](#) in 2021.

Tell us about your chess background in Iran, becoming a WFM before becoming an International Arbiter.

My father taught me how to play chess when I was nine years old and I took an immediate interest in the game. Chess is extremely beautiful and deep and there is always room for learning. It also requires logic and critical thinking, that is why the game fascinates me. I have played chess professionally for years and got my WFM title based on rating. I also won numerous Iranian tournaments in women's and junior chess championships and played for the Iran national team in youth, junior and adult levels.

You recently received the International Women of Courage Award. How did this award rank in your achievements?

I am indeed thrilled and honoured, it was a nice surprise, however, part of me knew that there are many women who are more courageous than me, so I decided to receive this Award as the representative of all courageous Iranian women who are labouring under the yoke of religious bigotry and oppression.

How are you adapting to life in the UK?

I had an extremely difficult year as an asylum seeker and I am grateful to the people who helped me to cope during this time. Now, I am a refugee, and things are improving quickly for me. I love Britain because it is my new home, a society with a rich culture and long illustrious history. I am happy and honoured to live in the UK and represent this wonderful country.

You have the title of WFM and a current grading of 2091. If you have the time, would you consider playing in UK Leagues or tournaments?

I have already played in the 2020 OTB London Chess league for Cavendish and in the 4NCL for CSC and I quite enjoyed it. Right now, I am playing for Cavendish again in the Online London League. I also played in the 2020 ECF Women's Blitz Chess Championship and finished second.

You are the first A-Grade arbiter from Asia and you were the Chief Arbiter of the Women's World Championship in 2020. What are your ambitions in your role as an arbiter?

I hope to get the chance to be Arbiter in the World Chess Championship Match in the Open section. As the councillor of the FIDE Arbiters' commission, I enjoy educational activities. I am leader of the FIDE Arbiters' Manual and we also organise refresher courses for

International Arbiters and FIDE lecturers. Our next step is to educate Arbiters from around the world about online chess.

You have recently been appointed to the newly-created post of Events Director for the ECF. What are your main priorities in the role?

Right now, our first priority is to go back to OTB chess as soon as possible. I hope to use my experience of tournaments around the world to improve ECF events.

What are the key skills and expertise required to make a good arbiter?

Titles are a useful form of recognition but they don't make you a good arbiter. It is about passion. It is a sobering responsibility, you have to know the rules and regulations and how to apply them, how to deal with players, how to maintain control and the ability to manage events.

I love the academic exercise of debating aspects of the Laws of Chess. In my free time I still study these things with arbiters around the world. Sometimes we argue for days about one sentence in the Laws!

Are we making progress in preventing cheating in over-the-board and online chess?

We are improving by using devices like metal detectors/ x-ray machines, scanners and electronic jamming, and thanks to Dr Ken Regan, Arbiters now have statistical evidence to challenge players who we believe are violating Fair Play regulations.

Arbiters also prevent cheating by technical supervision of games. In some online events we use video communication apps such as Zoom to monitor players and their computer screens. FIDE has also introduced new anti-cheating laws for online chess which have proved to be successful.

Aside from your work in chess you also hold a Masters degree in natural resources engineering. Are you also working in that area?

I have worked on the use of technology like satellite images on the estimation of forest biodiversity, and have published articles in scientific journals. But now I am solely involved in chess events.

Who have been the most influential people in your chess career?

Nigel Short has been the most influential person in my chess career. When I was 11 years old, my coach told me about Nigel and we studied some of his games together. I first met him in New Delhi when he visited a junior tournament in which I was playing. He came to Iran several times, working as the national coach for one year, and did much to promote chess in my country. In my experience, he has always been very supportive of women's chess, in contrast to the very unfair reputation which some people seek to pin on him. Nigel also helped me greatly when the hijab crisis unexpectedly broke in January 2020, providing me with support, advice and practical help.

What are your interests outside of chess?

I broaden my horizons by traveling, and getting to know other cultures, finding new friends and trying different cuisine. I like reading historical Persian poems. I also like American television series, my favourite one is *Breaking Bad* and I really enjoyed *The Queen's Gambit*.