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fire



Even If We Lose Our Lives

First-hand accounts
from Afghan women
human rights defenders

Scripted by Christine Bacon

From the scriptwriter

TEXT NOTES

All testimony in this script is actual, drawn from a number of interviews with the individual women, mostly conducted via phone or Skype. Manizha is a native English speaker. Parween and Dr D were interviewed in their own language and their words are in translation. Some names and places have been changed to protect individuals.

This is not a play, but a presentation of a documentary script. The thought I held while compiling the script was that of actors giving evidence on behalf of those who cannot. After many years of writing and directing these kinds of scripts, my strong advice is that the cast do not adopt 'ethnic' accents. We are telling these stories on behalf of those who have been denied a voice; impersonation cuts across the nature of the event. The immediacy of the stories is strengthened by being delivered in the actor's own voice.

Even if We Lose Our Lives is written for three actors, who each take on the role of one of the women. At some points in the script, you will notice that Actor 1/2/3 also appear. These roles have been assigned in the list of characters in the cast listing. The sense with these sections is that we are dropping briefly into a scene before continuing with the testimonies. They really help bring the piece to life and, by punctuating long testimonials, provide a different dynamic to the piece.

When reading the lines for Actor 1/2/3, there is no need to think about any detailed 'characterisation'. Rather, what should be most clear is the intention behind what you are saying; and making sure you are clear on who you direct the line to (ie, the appropriate person on stage or to the audience).

While I suggest that the actors remain seated throughout, the one exception to that is when Actor 1 as the 15-year-old girl (page 9) speaks about her abuse. It is appropriate (and will help clarify what is happening) for Actor 1 to stand and address the audience here (and then sit back down when finished).

The tone of the delivery should be guided by the content of the script rather than the idea that the audience needs to know 'this is serious' right from the beginning. I suggest starting with a lightness and ease with the women (they don't start talking about their difficult experiences until later) and encourage you to find a lightness and humour in your delivery wherever appropriate.

Please refer to the more detailed notes in your instruction pack and also the online film of the launch performance for further information and guidance.

Good luck and thanks

Christine Bacon
February 2014



CAST LISTING

.....
Parween /Actor 1
– Female 50s
.....

Dr D/Actor 2
– Female 40s
.....

Manizha/Actor 3
– Female late 30s
.....

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this script are those of the women interviewed and do not necessarily reflect the views of the writer or the official policy or position of Amnesty International.

Even If We Lose Our Lives

Parween

Yes, I am very proud to be an Afghan. I have always been proud of that.

Manizha

I'm an Afghan American. I'm proud to be both. 50/50.

Dr D

Of course I am proud to be an Afghan.

Manizha

I love the people the most, the hospitality, the openness. If you go to an Afghan's house and in order to protect you, even if he has to die, he will gladly do that. They love you with all of their heart. And the strength of the Afghan people, they've been through 40 years of war and they're still so resilient... I mean in the US if people went through that much war they would break and... Afghans have not done that.

Dr D

I am very proud of my country.

Parween

One thousand per cent proud.

Manizha

They've endured.

.....

Dr D

I don't want you to mention my name. And please don't mention the district.

Parween

I pray to God to give me the strength to tell you the story.

Manizha

I was born in Kabul. My father was educated in Germany – he was an engineer. And at that time, all educated people either had to join the Soviet-backed government or they would be imprisoned and killed. Thousands of people disappeared during that time. A list of 5,000 names was released by the Dutch authorities last year. Before that, their families didn't know... many held out some hope for decades that they may see their loved ones again.

So one night, when I was a small child, my father was told...

Actor 1

They're coming for you.

Manizha

What I remember very clearly is that we were sitting having dinner. And we just got up and left. Everything still on the table. We just left with the clothes we were wearing and went to my grandmother's house in the dark. And the next morning, as the sun was rising, we went to the bus stop and we went to Pakistan.

Many Afghans went to Pakistan. Millions. We were living in a camp for three years and then we came as refugees to the US. New York. It's difficult for any refugee family coming to a brand new country where you don't know the language. So for a while, my father was washing dishes at a local restaurant. Once he learned English and got to know how to do things in the US he got a job as an electrical engineer. Not long after, he was driving somewhere for work and he got into a car accident and died.

I had just turned 10 and had two younger siblings. And my mother, she had finished high school but she didn't know English, she didn't know how to raise her children by herself. But she got a job and she did all she could to raise us, and it was tough. But the good thing was that we were in the US. Being a fatherless child in Afghanistan, especially if you're a female, anybody can have a say over you. A lot of the things that happen in Afghanistan could have easily happened to me.

Parween

We were inspired by our father's teachings and convictions. My father's main goal was to serve his country; and he wanted his children to follow his example and serve the country unconditionally. Once I was feeling unwell and I didn't go to school. My father was so angry with me and he said – 'You should not sit at home. You must work for your people.' He was strict with us, but he was a very liberal man and he made sure that all his children went to school. Five years ago, when my father was dying he took a commitment from his children to serve Afghanistan even if we lose our lives. We gave him that commitment.

Dr D

I think I am about 42 years old. In Afghanistan nobody celebrates birthdays. The parents do not even know the date of birth of their children! Like Parween, my father was a liberal man and he made huge efforts to educate us. We were five brothers and four sisters and my father put in the same effort for both his daughters and sons. Whenever we had any problems with the lessons he would help us happily. I remember, when my father's friends came to our house he was telling them that he loves his daughters more than his sons because we were more interested in education. I was very lucky. The rest of my relatives' daughters all grew up uneducated.

When I was nine years old my father asked me what I wanted to become in the future, and I told him I wanted to become a doctor. Because I used to dress up in a doctor's uniform and acted like a doctor. It was my passion from a young age. And because I am a woman, I decided to be a doctor to serve women.

I thank God that I achieved my goal.

Manizha

Growing up I always wanted to do something to help Afghan women, because obviously I was one of them. My mother told us only about the good days in Afghanistan, the greenery and the time when we had a peaceful life. But I was following the news from the US, about the bloodbath that was happening. And everyone was talking about the Taliban, so I wanted to do something – but I didn't know what because when you're alone you think, well, I'm just one person, what can I do? So I didn't do anything for a while. I completed a degree in English Language Arts and I thought maybe I would become a teacher in the US. I didn't really have thoughts about working in Afghanistan or running any organisation. Then 9/11 happened and lots of things changed.

Dr D

Yes, of course, we were feeling happy when we heard the US would come and invade, because at that time we were very scared and did not know what was going to happen. The situation was so bad I was even ready to leave the country.

Parween

Taliban had made life miserable for men and women. We desperately needed the help of the international community. It is because of the international community's interference that we are able to go out and work now.

Manizha

When I heard, my feelings were, you know... finally. Because Afghanistan had been through so much... through the Mujahideen and Taliban era, and the people really needed help from the outside. Finally. And yes, I was worried about the US government's real motives, but I was more focused on the good things that could happen as a result. It opened up a vast array of opportunities.

Then I met the two founders of a group called Women for Afghan Women in a local park in Queens. They were looking for local Afghans to help them. And that's when I saw my calling. I called them the next day and started volunteering full time.

At that time the organisation was very new, we didn't have a mission or any programmes. So we started building that up, and in 2003 we went to

Afghanistan to see what we could do there. While I was there we visited the women's prison. Most of the women were there because they had run away from an abusive situation, and because there were no shelters, the police would say – for your own safety we are putting you in prison. And they were there with their children. That's when I vowed to myself that I would go back to Afghanistan.

So we started what we called Family Guidance Centres in 2006. Places where women either come or are referred if they've experienced any form of abuse. Anything and everything. When they first come we try to see if there's a way for us to mediate with the family so she can go back and be safe. That's what she really wants. No woman in Afghanistan wants to leave their families if they don't have to. And in the majority of the cases mediation is possible and it's successful.

We call the father or husband and we say, 'She is with us, she's safe, we want you to come to our office so we can talk to you.' He comes to our office and says something like: 'She's my daughter, she's my wife, she belongs to me, God has given me this right. I can do whatever I want.' It takes us a while, depending on how strong-headed he is, a day, two days, a week, a month, to make him understand that what he is doing is wrong according to Islam and according to the law.

And then you tell them what could happen if a 12-year-old is forced into a marriage, to be in a sexual relationship with someone, usually a much older man. And her body is definitely not ready to have children. Also – wives are expected to take care of extended families. How do you expect a 12-year-old to take care of a family of 10 or 15?

It's a shock to them, 'Well, yes, right, I hadn't thought of this.' You can see that you're getting in their heads. That's when change happens, we're breaking the cycle of violence in that family. If the girl agrees to go home, we make unannounced follow up visits for one year to make sure that she's okay. And this means we're also helping the other daughters in the family, and the granddaughters and so on. It's a big job, of course, we're trying to change culture, and culture doesn't change overnight.

Parween

I attended the University for Teachers Training in Kabul. I enjoyed my university life, I was an intelligent student and I managed to do well, even though there was chaos in the country at the time. I was single and did not have any particular responsibilities. I was focusing only on my study. I didn't meet my husband before marriage; in our culture we are not allowed to have any affair with a boy before marriage. At the time, my husband was commanding a police company in Jalalabad. He saw me on the way to university and then our marriage was arranged.

When I graduated, I was given a teacher's job in Kabul but the general

situation was very dangerous and we had to emigrate to a refugee camp in Pakistan for our own safety. I noticed there was only education for boys in the camp, so I decided to open a school for the girls and started to teach them. That school is still running today and many girls have graduated and are working as teachers, doctors and in other professions. Some people criticised me; they would say that school makes girls immoral and they will start writing letters to boys and so on. I have had to deal with ignorance like this my whole life.

Manizha

Afghans think that they're following the Koran and they're real Muslims, but most Afghans – they're following culture, they don't know what real Islam is because the Koran is written in Arabic. Afghans don't speak Arabic, so the mullahs just teach their own interpretation of the Koran.

Parween

When my family returned to Afghanistan I started to work for the World Food Programme and encouraged women to come out of their houses and work in the bakery shops managed by the Programme. I also established the only school for girls in that province. But during the Taliban rule the doors to education were completely shut for girls. So I turned my house in a school and started to teach girls secretly.

I became a candidate for the Afghan parliament after the Taliban government collapsed. From that time on I started to receive death threats and warnings because of my work. Despite this, I accepted an invitation to go to Sweden to receive a medal. I was also awarded a medal for my work in education by the Afghan government. My husband began working for the UN surveying the poppy cultivation. His job is also very dangerous because he has to deal with drug traders. But we are well respected in our village and our province. We have no personal enmity with anyone.

Dr D

I did my training in Nangarhar University and I enjoyed my time there, because I truly loved my profession. I had no worries, as my parents supported me financially; they even provided my siblings and I with private rooms at home in order for us not to get disturbed while studying.

SCRIPT NOTE: *This should be delivered in a slightly mocking tone – ie, 'I was such a straight-laced, boring student!' The memory of this and why her husband liked her is a memory that makes her laugh.*

I met my husband at university – he is a doctor too. At that time, girls and boys were coming to school with modern dress and girls wore makeup but I used to dress simply. There was a lot of flirting between the girls and the boys, but I was a strict girl and didn't talk to boys and was just focusing on my studies. My husband once told me that he started to like me because I didn't flirt with other boys.

After I graduated from university I started practising gynaecology. I had all sorts of cases coming to me, from someone who couldn't bear a child and her husband wanted to re-marry because of that, to cases of rape and sexual violence. Some girls were pregnant from their brothers, uncles, fathers-in-law and many women wanted to abort the child which was the proof of the rape. If the child was not aborted and the tribe or family found out that the woman was pregnant due to rape, then they would kill the woman. So, I decided to deal with abortion cases secretly. And of course, domestic violence. You may have heard the recent incident where an addicted husband cut off his wife's ear, nose and lips? I was advising the women I saw to seek justice, to speak out and to report what had happened. I was encouraging women even if they need to take support from the local shuras and mullahs, they should do so instead of sobbing in silence. There is too much cruelty towards women, if you really listen to their stories you cannot sleep, it is beyond anyone's imagination.

Manizha

Sometimes mediation isn't successful because it's too dangerous to send the woman home. We have a 15-year-old girl in one of our centres at the moment in this situation.

SCRIPT NOTE: *Actor 1 stands up.*

Actor 1

My father was pressuring me to marry a man of 45, but I refused. I expected to be beaten behind closed doors. I never imagined dishonour and mistreatment in a public place. First my father and brother stabbed my hand with a knife then three times in the side. Then my father put his feet on either side of me and he began to slaughter me like a sheep. When he reached for my throat, I said my prayers. He said – is she dead? My brother said yes, cover her with the burka, and they left. When I regained consciousness, I pushed my intestines back in my body and got up. I could see two people coming towards me with flashlights. I couldn't speak because my throat was split open. Covering the wound I tried to tell them what happened.

SCRIPT NOTE: *Actor 1 sits down.*

Manizha

They took her to us and she is recovering. We also have a 16-year-old.

Actor 2

My brother struck me with an axe more than 15 times. This was because I ran away from my 65-year-old abusive husband.

Manizha

We got her emergency medical care. And we're working on her divorce.

In cases like those we also work with the Prosecutors' Office, to gather evidence.

Most men who are doing these things – it's not because they're evil, they're doing it because that's what they know, they don't know anything else. A 35-year-old Afghan man today, he was born into war and he has known nothing else but war. You must understand that the whole country is traumatised. A man who has seen his neighbours killed, his friends killed, his brother, his father. What do you expect of him?

And it's not just men. Violence like this is a cycle and mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law who grow up experiencing violence then continue that. Sometimes they are the direct abuser, but mostly, they are instigating their brother or their son – 'your wife doesn't listen to me, she's not obedient, she's not cooking well, she's not doing the housework,' you know. Then her son or brother does the actual beating up. She fuels the fire. Violence – it's just become a way of life. It happens everywhere.

Since we started in 2007 we've expanded to – we're now in ten provinces. It's a pretty rapid growth. A staff of 479 people. Lots of volunteers in the US. We've directly helped over 8,000 women. And we still get demands every single week from other provinces asking us to come to them.

But we can't do fundraising fast enough. I really hate fundraising. It takes up about 40% of my time. It's the worst part of the job.

We have large international donors, but with that comes unpredictability. With the US State department, the funds are approved by the US Congress. And next year they may say well, there's no more money for Afghanistan.

Parween

It was in 2009. My son left home in his car one morning, a Friday morning, and said he would come back soon, but he didn't come home for lunch, which he usually did. We called his number but his phone was off. By the afternoon we started to panic and then the whole village started searching for him. We checked with the hospital, accident department of the traffic and police. But no news. That was the longest night of my life. The next morning my husband received a phone call -

Actor 3

You don't need to search for your son. He is with us.

Parween

My husband put the phone on loudspeaker so we all could hear the call. I said – What do you want?

Actor 3

We warned you several times before to stop your work.

Parween

What do you want?

Actor 3

\$300,000 to release your son.

Parween

We can't pay you \$300,000 – where will we get that sort of money from?

Actor 3

You can open a girls school, your husband is working for a UN agency. You go to Sweden, you stood as a candidate for parliament and you even received a medal which is made of gold and say you have nothing? Your son wants to say something.

Actor 2

They told me that I should have stopped you from working. Come and take me back home.

Actor 3

Give us the money otherwise we will kill your son.

Parween

They did not contact us again. My husband said – don't worry he is alive. We should focus on how we can set him free.

During the time my son was missing, my husband and my brother-in-laws were constantly calling the police department of the province to ask if they had found any bodies. Whenever we heard of a corpse that was discovered we rushed to see if it was my son. We even opened some unmarked graves looking for him. We saw corpses which were half eaten by animals, some had ropes or wire around their necks, and some had gunshot wounds. After one year and three months we had a call from police...

Actor 2

Some nomads in the desert found a body stuck in some trees. It was washed down a hillside by the recent flood. It seems to match the description of your son.

Parween

My husband went to the police station. He recognised my son from a surgical scar which he had on his abdomen. My son's body had 12 bullets in the chest and stomach. The body was decomposed, his eyes and face were unrecognisable. They told us that he was killed at least three months before. Later, we found out that the kidnappers tortured him for one year, before they killed him.

My husband brought his body home. Then we later buried him.

My son's name was Hamayun and he was 18 years old. He had graduated from the school and got a placement in the faculty of Sharia in Jalalabad University after successfully passing the exam. He worked as a taxi driver in his spare time to earn a living. He was very supportive of me and my work. He prayed for the progression of the country. He was well-known for his modern thinking among the young community here. I remember during the time I was a parliamentary candidate, a Mullah started preaching against me, saying that if someone's wife is working outside home, this is a disgrace to our community.

At that time my Hamayun was very young and he grabbed the Mullah's collar and told him what he was saying was wrong. He said, 'My mother is an educated woman and she is running the only school for girls in this province. She has dedicated her life for the education of the children of this country by taking lots of risks.'

So, I mean I brought my children up in the same way as my parents brought me up.

Dr D

For me personally, the problems started in 2007. I received threatening letters from the Taliban that arrived at night. My husband would find them in our back yard, but he didn't tell me about them, because he didn't want me to worry. According to those people the work I do is un-Islamic. I was inside the house and my twin sons, aged 10 years old, were playing outside in the front yard. I heard a huge noise, a huge bang, and then saw black smoke... I felt like I became deaf... the windows shattered. I ran outside and I saw my son was lying in a pool of blood and his clothes were torn apart... he was covered in dust and smoke. I screamed and grabbed him and I looked to my other son but he was fine. I took my son to an American military unit for treatment and because his injuries were very serious I had to take him to Pakistan for an operation. I can't describe my son's injuries, I would scream if I did. We have spent a lot of money on his treatment. He is psychologically unwell – it has had a terrible effect on him. He always asks me 'Why did this happen to me?'

Parween

Then, it was just last year, my whole family were in the car, driving from school to home in the evening. Our car hit a roadside bomb – a remote control one, planted there. My husband was seriously wounded. Every part of his body is in pain and it is difficult now for him to do his job which involves a lot of travel. But he is alive. I and the children were lucky to escape with minor injuries.

Dr D

Very soon after this happened... I received a call to tell me my brother was killed in another targeted bomb attack near the shops in front of our house. We had received threats to my family before the attack – so it was obvious

that he was killed because of my work.

I just screamed and screamed.

My brother was very young; 22 years old. He was married and had two children. He ran a grocery shop to earn a living and wanted to go to university.

Parween

Even after this has happened to us, I still receive calls telling me that if I don't stop working on education they will kill my other children.

Dr D

Now, I am hyper vigilant. I can't help it. If my children are late home I panic. When my husband leaves home for work and my children leave for school, I start worrying that something might happen to them.

The threats continue. We moved to a different province and I am still working but trying to not make my work public. When my patients need to contact me – at first they contact me secretly, then I ask them to come with one of their friends not family members.

Parween

We have left our house and we are always on the move from one place to another. Whenever they find our mobile phone number they start threatening us by calling.

Dr D

The shadow of fear is following me all the time.

Parween

My children and I see a psychologist now. We all living in fear. Whenever I hear the gate of the house open, I panic. The police say they have investigated the threats, but no results. I have also gone to human rights organisations, but yet no one has helped us find justice.

Dr D

We reported everything to the government, but nobody listened to us and we felt very discouraged. Whenever we ask, the police say the case is under investigation. They have done nothing so far.

Parween

I don't know why they are so threatened by my work. Teaching people to read and write and helping children to have a better future? The people who did this to us and those who burn schools, kill teachers and students are not Muslim. The first teaching of Quran is 'Seek knowledge even if you are required to go to China'.

Dr D

I don't really understand why we were targeted, because I was not doing anything controversial. I was simply helping women, saving their lives.

Parween

God curse them.

Manizha

I live permanently in Afghanistan now. I met my husband here. A regular Afghan guy who had never left Afghanistan even during the years of war. He's very supportive of me and my work and equal rights for women and girls. No cultural clashes, thank goodness. He's very emotional about it when he talks about what I do. He's very proud. It makes him cry.

It's easy to forget, but a lot of progress has been made. No one really talks about the progress though, because it's not sexy enough. Since the overthrow of the Taliban millions of girls are in school, hundreds of thousands are in university, women are working in the government, in NGOs, there are women journalists, in every single field you can see women that are thriving. My four daughters are growing up here. The girls that we're educating today, when they have children, they're going to make sure that their girls are in school and that their daughters have equal rights as their sons.

My daughters, they'll have a full life. But we have a lot of work ahead of us. Britain wasn't like it is today, let's say 70 years ago, right? Women had a different role, back then. Afghanistan is in that situation now, where the woman's place is in the house right now.

If you saw pictures of Kabul before 9/11 and pictures today, it's a different world. The progress is undeniable. But we are now at a crossroads and we need time. We need a chance.

Parween

If we wanted we could leave this country and run away. But this is not our aim, our main goal is to serve the people of this country. We want a progressed, peaceful, free and independent Afghanistan. For this, we have accepted the risks to our lives.

Dr D

All people have concern and fear about the international troops leaving, and we don't know what is going to happen, which type of regime will come. So the situation is very tense. We wonder – what will be the outcome?

Manizha

I'm against negotiations with the Taliban. They cannot be trusted – their actions have shown that.

People in the southern parts of the country who have joined the Taliban, I really don't think that they've joined the Taliban because they want to fight. They've joined because there are no jobs available for them. Nothing's being done about that. If you want to fix a nation you have to give them jobs. The Taliban pay their fighters \$200 a month. And with \$200 a month you can feed your family. We are negotiating with these tyrants who are killing us on one side and then setting up an office in Doha on the other side and saying we want peace... what kind of peace is that? If Afghan women are being beaten up or if girls are forced to stay home and not go to school, that's not peace for them, that's hell for them.

That's my point of view but the reality is that negotiations are happening, the Afghan government is eager to do this because they think the Americans are leaving and they'll be left with the Taliban. The Americans want to negotiate because that's their exit strategy.

We've had threats from the Taliban. We've received calls, telling us our province manager was going to be murdered if we didn't give a girl back. Situations like these become more and more dangerous as these negotiations with the Taliban keep going. We're a small women's NGO – we can't make deals with the Taliban!

If the Taliban come back to power it will not be possible to do our work. Everyone wants peace but it should not come on the backs of Afghan women.

Parween

The insurgents are restrained by international forces. That is why normal work is going on and ordinary people are continuing to do their normal business.

Manizha

I know the US public is losing hope for Afghanistan, and they are losing patience. So is the rest of the world. They think after 12 years of war nothing has happened and that we should leave Afghanistan and just let them fend for themselves. It's easy for people to say. But we're talking about millions of women, children and men who don't want war.

Development aid has to keep coming and that can't stop because Afghanistan is not self-sufficient yet. It's still a third-world country. The Afghan government can't even pay the salaries of its soldiers! Our civil society is very young and underdeveloped. So if the international money stops, that will also collapse.

As I said before, we just need time. We just need more time to work on this.

Dr D

My brother has migrated to Europe. I myself have not yet considered leaving

Afghanistan. We have to help our people particularly women, they need us. I can't sit at home and do nothing, this is not in my nature.

Parween

Despite all that has happened, I will not give up on educating girls in this country because education is empowerment.

I have to work; I can't imagine doing nothing. It doesn't matter if I stay at home or go out to school; my life is at risk in both places anyway. I take precautionary measures like if in some places it is necessary to wear Burka I will wear it and we often move from place to place. I have to do my job.

Manizha

We cannot abandon Afghanistan and Afghan women. That's not an option. Period. My mother thinks I should come back to the US and do something else. She's worried about my safety. I don't confront her, I just let her say what she wants to say and... not really listen.

Dr D

I feel guilt and distress daily; particularly when I see my son limping. Sometimes when he goes out to play and the boys call him terrible names, I get very upset. At night before I sleep I think about what might happen next. But during the day I try to forget everything, as I focus on my work and when I am with my children. That's the only thing that gives me some peace.

Manizha

There is no time to do anything else that is not related to work. No time. All my time is either work or family. I try to relax each evening with my children. I think I've balanced that very well. But, I have a vacation that's way overdue, that well, I don't know when I'm going to take it. I can't remember the last vacation I had. One day.

Parween

At times, I feel quite lost and it's hard to think of anything that makes me happy. Sometimes I feel strange and my body aches or feels numb. I often wake up suddenly in the middle of night and feel... premonition. I get such pain in my heart from the anxiety. It is only my children who can comfort me and encourage me; they calm me down by saying 'Mum, don't worry. Everything will be alright.'

END