

GROUP CAMPAIGN UPDATE



WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN // MARCH 2014

Women's rights in Afghanistan: Protect the progress



A small selection of the incredible patches you have sent us for our solidarity action with Afghan Women Skills Development Centre!

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Afghanistan 2014: What lies ahead for women's rights?

2014 is set to be a critical year for Afghanistan, and particularly for women's rights. International troops will withdraw from the country by the end of the year and Presidential elections are scheduled for April. International pressure to reach a political solution to the conflict and negotiate with the Taliban and other insurgent groups is growing. Afghan women, who have already been sidelined from the peace process, have well-founded fears that should the Afghan government and international community strike a peace deal, their rights will be negotiated away.

More worryingly there are several indications that the fragile progress for women's rights might already be backsliding. Last year the conservative Afghan parliament heavily criticised the progressive Elimination of Violence against Women law and almost succeeded in removing the 25% quotas for women sitting on provincial councils. Additionally there have been attacks on no less than nine high-profile Afghan women in the last six months, including the murder of four policewomen, a pregnant teacher, an author and a local government worker. Almost exclusively these attacks have happened with impunity, sending an incredibly dangerous message that, in the words of Suraya Pakzad, who runs women's shelters in several provinces: *"Killing women in Afghanistan is an easy thing. There's no punishment"*.

Fragile human rights gains made in recent years need to be supported and consolidated throughout the transition and beyond. The role of human rights defenders will be fundamental in protecting human rights and ensuring the Afghan government meets its commitments but their ability to do this will be severely compromised if their security becomes ever more fragile. It is absolutely essential that women's rights in Afghanistan are kept firmly on the UK government's agenda and that every possible effort is made to protect those on the frontline – teachers, doctors, civil society activists and parliamentarians – who are instrumental in defending women's rights, pushing for peace and supporting their communities.

What have you been doing?

In November last year we held a high-profile event in Parliament's Speaker's House showcasing the incredible work you have done on this campaign, attended by which more than 60 Amnesty activists from all over the country and 20+ MPs. The event really helped to keep the issues on the parliamentary agenda. We were also inundated with beautiful patches and complete quilts expressing your solidarity with Afghan women's organisations. We'll be sending solidarity quilts to Women for Afghan Women and the Afghan Women Skills and Development Centre imminently.



Left and middle: Activists from Wolverhampton and Beckenham & West Wickham groups speaking to MPs. Right: Chris Usher, AIUK Country Coordinator for Afghanistan, watching the speeches

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Other successes:

In December Justine Greening, Secretary of State for International Development, announced the first elements of her Department's Strategic Priority on tackling violence against women in Afghanistan (which Amnesty International UK had been instrumental in achieving). The Secretary of State announced £3 million of new funding for an access to justice project and ringfenced £2 million existing funding for civil society organisations working on violence against women (one of our key calls). This is a great start and we'll continue to work with Department for International Development (DFID) to ensure plans are developed in consultation with Afghan women and include holistic efforts to tackle violence.

In November we hosted two Afghan women human rights defenders for a UK visit. As well as speaking at our Student Conference and at the Speakers House event, we arranged meetings with the Foreign Office and DFID, 10 MPs and a House of Lords representative alongside a couple of media opportunities, one of which resulted in an article in the Times.

More than 20,000 people watched our campaign films, released to mark Human Rights day on 10 December, which highlight the important and varied roles that brave women human rights defenders play in pressing for peace in Afghanistan, and the dangerous circumstances they often find themselves in. More than 6,000 Amnesty supporters wrote to their MPs as part of an action launched at the same time, calling for women human rights defenders to receive increased support and protection from the UK government. We are continuing to pressure the Foreign Office to improve their support and will be asking for your help to do this.

WHAT NEXT FOR THE CAMPAIGN?

The next phase of our campaign will build on the work you have done to develop relationships with your MP and the actions taken which call on the UK government to improve support and protection for women human rights defenders in Afghanistan. We need to make sure that the stories of brave Afghan women who are among the most active agents for change in their communities are told, and that support and protection for them is improved during this year, which holds much uncertainty. Your support is going to be crucial and we have lots of actions in this mailing for you to get involved with.

Resources: There are a range of resources included in this mailing and you can also order other materials direct from TFS: 01788 545553 including our policy position paper (WM248), stickers (WM244) and posters (WM245).

Action 1: Hold a reading event. Tell the moving stories of Afghan women human rights defenders

Afghan women are too often portrayed as faceless, passive victims who are powerless to change the grave human rights abuses they are regularly affected by. But this narrative ignores the countless Afghan women who are fearlessly working to promote women's rights and support their communities.

To support our campaign for improved support and protection of human rights defenders we've teamed up with renowned human rights theatre company ice&fire to create a powerful script based on the testimonies of three Afghan women: Parween a headmistress targeted for running a girls school, Dr D, a gynaecologist whose son was injured in a bomb blast and Manizha, who runs the largest Afghan organisation working on violence against women and girls.

We'll be using this script to draw attention to the work of Afghan women on the frontline and we're asking you to help us do this by holding 'reading' events all over the country. We hope the raw honesty of these narratives will help inspire members of your local community to take action in support of Afghan women and you can use the event to engage your local MP and media in the issues.

What to do:

Please hold a reading of *Even if we lose our lives*, the script developed by ice&fire. The attached instruction pack will tell you everything you need to know about holding a 'reading' event.

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Action 2: Photo action. Show support for women on the frontline

We know that Afghan women human rights defenders appreciate your support. Mary Akrami, who featured in our last Campaign update and whose organisation was one of 2013's Write for Rights cases, recently said "We are really grateful to you for this drive and support...it will go long way to motivate us to keep up the hard work".

To let Afghan women human rights defenders know that Amnesty supporters in the UK are standing with them at this critical time, we are asking you to take a photo of yourselves (preferably each group member individually) holding messages which highlight the stories of the Afghan women who have lost their lives because of their work.

We're after as many of your photos as possible so please use this action at events and on stalls, as well as at your group meeting.

What to do:

1 - Print out the attached placards or order paper copies from
TFS: 01788 545553

WM249	Placard "Afghanistan. Protect Women on the Frontline"
WM250	Placard "Sushmita Banerjee. Killed September 2013"
WM251	Placard "Yalda Waziri. Killed January 2014"
WM252	Placard "Lt Negar. Killed September 2013"

2 - Ask people to pose for a photo holding one of the placards (individual photos preferred as we will use this like a petition).

3 - Make sure when taking the photos that each person is happy for their photograph to be used online and shared with human rights defenders in Afghanistan and the UK government. Photos will be used to express solidarity with Afghan women human rights defenders and as a way to pressure the UK government to improve support and protection.

Please send the photos to: activism@amnesty.org.uk

Action 3: Meet your MP

You've probably already written to your MP about this campaign and many of you will have met with them as well. We'd like to encourage you to continue your engagement at this critical time when hard won gains for women's rights are at risk of being lost.

We're calling for the UK government to strengthen its efforts to support and protect human rights defenders. Human rights defenders are doing all they can to protect gains in women's rights and to ensure the Afghan government meets its human rights commitments, but their ability to do this work will be seriously compromised if their security continues to remain fragile.

Included in this mailing is a briefing, which will help you prepare for a meeting with your MP if you are able to arrange one. If you are planning on meeting your MP, why not get in touch with your local student/youth groups and work together? Contact activism@amnesty.org.uk for details or see the list on the website: <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/groups>

Nb. If you are able to hold a 'reading' event (Action 1), why not invite your MP and arrange a short meeting afterwards? If they aren't able to attend you can request an alternative time.

