

INSIDE MEERWALA

NEWS FROM MUKHTAR MAI WOMEN'S WELFARE ORGANIZATION

"School is the first step to change the world. It's always the first step that causes the most trouble, but it's the start of progress."

— Mukhtar Mai

Growing Voices for Change

On Dec. 10, 2009, International Human Rights Day, Mukhtar Mai Women's Welfare Organization (MMWWO) hosted the event "Ending Violence Against Women." MMWWO had invited nearly 700 men and women to the Art Council in Multan to raise their voices against violence. However, because of security concerns amid recent bombings, the event was moved to a local hotel, where about 200 men and women attended.

Several speakers addressed the crowd. Samson Salamat, MMWWO's Program Manager, spoke of the efforts MMWWO is making for the protection and promotion of women's rights. Naseem Akhtar, the organization's Managing Director, expressed her gratitude to the volunteers and staff who had gathered.

"All human beings are born free and are entitled to equal rights and dignity," Naseem said, quoting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. "The slogan of our movement is equality irrespective of gender, caste, color or creed. If we follow this basic principal of human rights, we can bring peace and prosperity in our society and stop injustice."

Yasmeen Akhtar, Deputy Director and Co-Founder of Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy, gave a speech, saying, "Women all over Pakistan are subjected to violence, especially in rural areas. Violence against women is to be condemned whether it is physical, sexual, mental or in any other way—it is not at all acceptable." Rozina Musharaf, a renowned singer, sang the words of the revolutionary poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz: *Hum Daikhain Gay (We Will See)*. Also, Rising Star Theater Group presented a stage play, *Aurat (Woman)*, depicting the causes of various types of violence against women.

One of the highlights of the event was a speech competition, featuring four contestants from four different districts. The winner, Atiya Farzeen, said that Prophet Muhammad condemned the killing of female babies, which was a common

practice during His lifetime. She went on to say that even today we observe the worst forms of violence against women—honor killing, genital mutilation, sexual assault and domestic violence—and if we look around we will witness that women are subjected to violence not only from men, but also from other women.

Finally, Naeem Akbar Jaskani, a volunteer from Rajanpur, cited MMWWO's capacity for building initiatives for volunteer human rights defenders. "The training helped to improve our skills, enhance confidence and commitment toward our mission," he said. "The speech competitions in the girls' colleges helped students to identify their rights and to raise their voice to get their rights. We were able to get in touch with different stakeholders, especially the women of the community through public meetings for awareness. The main goal behind our struggle is to acknowledge the issue of violence against women—and we have been very successful so far."

Adding to Naeem's remarks, MMWWO's volunteers from five districts made a vow: "We are committed to working with MMWWO for the protection and promotion of women's rights."

Mukhtar addressed the group, as well, telling the assembly that Pakistani women face various forms of discrimination due to the unjust social structure, which does not even recognize women's rights as human rights even though women comprise half the country's population.

"We must come together and continue our struggle to get rid of violence against women," Mukhtar said, "and to ensure that their rights are recognized and respected."





Days of Change

In anticipation of International Human Rights Day, MMWWO launched the campaign, “Ending Violence Against Women: Practical Steps to Observe 16 Days of Activism.” Aimed at denouncing all forms of violence and advocating for practical steps in its elimination, the campaign utilized auto rickshaws and public message banners to spread the message of nonviolence.

Auto rickshaws are used for public transportation in Pakistan’s rural areas, and during the campaign, they carried a banner decrying violence against women on the roads of Multan, the most populous city of South Punjab. The banner read, “If you are subjected to violence or you know any woman or girl who is facing any form of violence (sexual, physical or mental), or the police and other state institutions are not performing their duties, please raise your voice and join our hands to stop violence and contact us.”

Additional banners with different slogans were displayed in the cities of Multan, Muzaffargarh, Bahawalpur, Rahim Yar Khan and Rajanpur. They were visible in public places such as universities, colleges, bus stands, courts and markets, saying:

- Empower women to change Pakistan
- Join hands to stop violence against women
- Violence against women is an inhuman act
- End oppression through education
- Inhuman behavior towards women is unacceptable
- Equal opportunities of education for boys and girls is a guarantee of a better future

What is My Future?

“My life does not have any happiness,” says 19-year-old Kiran*, who was able to reach Mukhtar Mai Shelter Home after a long journey on a dark and freezing night when she had no shoes or means of transport.

“I don’t know how many hours or kilometers I walked and ran,” she says. “I just remember that it was midnight when I quietly left home. It was dark all around and dogs were barking and I was traveling through fields the whole night. It was almost dawn when I entered a house and took shelter.”

She stopped at a house that, luckily, belonged to a journalist who contacted the MMWWO helpline and was told to bring Kiran to Meerwala.

Kiran’s ordeal began with the separation of her parents when she was 3 years old. She was raised by her grandmother and stepmother, and became a domestic worker at age 9. She was forced to give her earnings to her grandmother, who beat her if she refused. When she was 15 years old, Kiran was forcibly married to her mentally challenged cousin. Her husband subjected her to severe violence on a regular basis and, because of her bleak life, Kiran attempted suicide.

After three years in this desperate situation, Kiran decided to sneak out of her house and try to find help.

“I didn’t think about the difficulties I could encounter,” she says, “because I had experienced bad things my whole life.”

Kiran has been admitted to the Mukhtar Mai Shelter Home. She is currently working with the legal advisor to file for a divorce. Beyond this, she is not sure what she will do. This is a similar situation to the many survivors who come to MMWWO—they know they need to get out of their current situation to save their lives, but there are limited options for divorced women in rural Pakistan. MMWWO continues to work with and support Kiran through this difficult time.