

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

Dear Friends,

The struggle for women's rights in the Pakistani society is a massive challenge. We come across tragic incidents of violence against women, including forced marriage, early marriage, honour killing, murder, selling of girls, domestic violence, rape, etc. To make the situation worse, when we try to access different state institutions for justice and punishment for the perpetrators, there is a great deal of harassment, threats, delays and non-cooperation.



As an organization that stands up for the rights of women, Mukhtar Mai Women's Welfare Organization (MMWWO) faces challenges from the forces that have used diverse ways and means in attempts to spoil the reputation and work of the organization. Unfortunately, in 2009 this trend has increased, but none of these challenges can stop our work.

Everyone at MMWWO remains committed in our efforts for women's rights, and thanks all our supporters for their assistance. We believe that our work is an imperative for social transformation.

Yours sincerely,
Naseem Akhtar
Managing Director & Co-founder

False Accusations

On June 11, 2009, representatives from Multan Electric Power Company (MEPCO) stormed the MMWWO headquarters in Meerwala, Tehsil Jatoi District Muzaffargarh, and accused the organization of stealing electricity. All electrical connection to the organization was disconnected without any notice, and cases were registered at Jatoi Police Station against Mukhtar Mai Girls Model School, Women's Resource Center and the Shelter Home.

This was a completely false accusation. MMWWO has the requisite documentation showing that all the electric bills are paid in full and to date. The organization spent 24 days without electricity with temperatures ranging from 40 to 45 degrees Celsius (104 - 113 degrees Fahrenheit).

However, due to your intervention, the electricity was restored on July 4, but no action has been taken against those responsible for this ordeal and intimidation.

It was clear to MMWWO that this was further harassment at the behest of Mr. Abdul Qayyum Jatoi, Federal Minister for Defence Production, and his associates, who have been intimidating Mukhtar and her colleagues in the past through different ways. His objective is to get Mukhtar to drop her personal case before the Supreme Court, but she remains steadfast in seeing her case through the judicial system.

Waiting for Justice

Mukhtar Mai's case in the Supreme Court of Pakistan was again adjourned on June 10, 2009, for an indefinite period. Mukhtar's case had been pending since July 2005. During the first half of this year, six hearings were scheduled and then subsequently adjourned on the day of the hearing. The case remains before the court indefinitely, and Mukhtar awaits the day when her case is finally resolved and the perpetrators sentenced. Mukhtar extends her gratitude to all her supporters around the world who intervened on her behalf, asking the Pakistani government to ensure that the court functions in a free and fair manner.

A New Program

MMWWO has started a Community Volunteer Program to strengthen its efforts for women's rights. The volunteers are trained on basic concepts of human rights, national mechanisms for the redress of women's rights violations, and guiding principles to be followed while dealing with survivors of violence.

The first workshop, called "Protection and Promotion of Women's Rights; Role of the Civil Society," was held in Multan on May 29-31. Twenty-eight volunteers participated, including social workers, journalists, university students, teachers and members of community-based organizations.



Marriage of Choice

by Samson Salamat, MMWWO Program Manager

June 14, 2009—Everyone in Meerwala was joyous. Girls were singing and dancing, drums were beating, Mukhtar, Naseem Akhtar and other staff members were busy preparing Shamma's wedding dress. Thanks to the support and efforts from MMWWO, Shamma was marrying the man of her choosing.

At 18, Shamma's father threatened to kill her if she did not marry the man he chose for her. Although her father is an officer in the Pakistan Army, Shamma didn't bow down to him. Instead, she insisted she be allowed to marry the man of her choice and took a stand against the forced marriage. As a result, Shamma became a symbol of resistance in Pakistani society, which is generally not conducive to the freedom of women and girls, especially when it comes to their right to marriage of choice.

On April 15, Shamma's father beat her, and tried to pressure her to give up her decision. Instead, she left home. She found her way to MMWWO's office in Multan, and was referred to the Shelter Home at Meerwala.

Shamma's father and mother came to Meerwala on April 22. However, Shamma refused to meet her parents because she feared they would force her to go back home. Her parents threatened MMWWO's staff and the security, accusing MMWWO of unlawful custody—despite the fact that Shamma had given a written statement of her consent for living in the Shelter Home.

On May 5, the head of the police station came to the MMWWO office with orders from the court for Shamma to appear. During the proceedings, Shamma recorded her statement and again refused to meet her parents. However, the judge forced her to meet with them. Despite threats to Shamma and MMWWO staff, everyone remained committed to Shamma's decision and she married the man of her choice shortly thereafter.

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*All MMWWO case names have been changed.