

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

Greetings,

My name is Mukhtar Mai and I serve as president of Mukhtar Mai Women's Welfare Organization. Based in my home village of Meerwala, Pakistan, our organization works for the protection and promotion of the rights of girls and women. Since 2003, MMWWO's advocacy and awareness campaign has

provided support and shelter to victims of violence throughout Pakistan, as well as a free education to hundreds of girls in the remote and deprived region of southern Punjab province.

I thank the support from all of you and reiterate my commitment to continue the efforts to address the plight of women and girls.

Yours sincerely,

Mukhtar Mai



Photo: Jack Morris

About Mukhtar Mai

Seven years ago, Mukhtar Mai, then an illiterate woman from rural Pakistan, was gang-raped as punishment for her brother's alleged affair with a woman of a higher class. Mukhtar refused to commit suicide, an "honor killing" that is custom in many parts of the world, and in an unprecedented act of courage she sued her attackers and won an \$8,000 settlement. She used the award to establish schools in her village of Meerwala and to fund Mukhtar Mai Women's Welfare Organization, dedicated to helping rape and abuse survivors in need of assistance and safe haven.

Today, Mukhtar inspires people around the world. In 2004, *TIME* magazine listed her as one of the world's most influential people. The following year, *Glamour* named her its "Woman of the Year," and in 2007 she was awarded the North-South Prize from the EU Council of Europe, which is granted to individuals who have "demonstrated strong and visible commitment, outstanding achievement and clear hope for the future regarding human rights protection."

Despite her international renown, Mukhtar still lives in fear for her life. Local tribe members aim to thwart her humanitarian efforts. Fortunately, she has countless admirers who continue to support her mission to replace ignorance and violence with equality and education.

Justice At Last

On March 4, 2009, the Supreme Court of Pakistan ruled, for the third time in a month, to “indefinitely adjourn” Mukhtar’s case, so her rapists will remain in jail until the case is called again. Her supporters around the world applauded the decision, although it could be overturned at any time. Before the third and latest hearing, Mukhtar spoke to the press in Islamabad.

“I reiterate loudly that I did not give up to the powerful,” she said. “I stood up for my right to justice in the past. I am committed to continue to do so, not just for myself but for all women subjected to inhumane and degrading treatment. I was never alone, and I will not be alone in this struggle.”

Meet Dua

On Aug. 23, 2008, Mukhtar adopted a baby girl. As a teenager, Ameena (not her real name) was raped and impregnated by her employer. Her parents wanted the man to marry Ameena as compensation, but he refused. The local police wouldn’t hear the complaint, as the man is a landlord and influential. Instead, Ameena’s family was offered a piece of land and told to leave their home. But Ameena’s parents refused and turned to MMWWO for help. Ameena was six months pregnant when she registered at Mukhtar Mai Women’s Resource Centre & Shelter Home.

Her medical treatment quickly began and, utilizing MMWWO’s legal assistance, a case was filed against her rapist. On Aug. 23, Ameena was taken to a hospital in Jatoi, where she gave birth to a baby girl. Two months later, she left Meerwala and Mukhtar adopted the infant, named Dua, meaning “prayer.”

Dua joins Mukhtar and her new husband, Nasir Abbas Gabol, a constable whom she married on March 15. Although her family has grown, Mukhtar remains committed to her work in Meerwala on behalf of women and children throughout Pakistan.



Photo: Chris Cork