

# 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,

My security, as well as the safety and security of Naseem Akhtar, the managing director of Mukhtar Mai Women's Welfare Organization, is at stake due to the threats from Tariq Ghazlani and Abid Ghazlani of Jatoi district Muzaffargarh at the behest of local political powers. They have openly announced their desire to bomb the vehicles and buildings of our organization at Meerwala to assassinate Naseem and myself.



The most recent move against us took place Sept. 16, 2009, when two influential community figures of the nearby town of Jatoi filed a report at the police station, falsely accusing us of involvement in a murder.

We strongly believe that this is a tactic of victimization to defame us and stop our struggle for women's rights in the remote areas of Pakistan. Moreover, it is another effort to put pressure on me to drop the charges against the 13 men of the Mastoi tribe who were involved either in the verdict against me or who gang raped me in 2002.

We have been in contact with police officials at district and provincial levels. However, the appeals remain unattended, and no concrete action has yet been taken.

We ask you to please send your interventions to put pressure on the government of Pakistan to take measures to stop this intimidation and ensure my safety and security along with my associates. For more information on where to send general emails in support of my case and MMWWO, please go to [bohemiafoundation.com/pakistan.html](http://bohemiafoundation.com/pakistan.html).

As always, we appreciate your continued and unwavering support.

Your Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in Urdu script, which reads 'مختار مای' (Mukhtar Mai).

Mukhtar Mai

## Fighting Back

Two men abducted Assiya\* when she was 16 years old. She was detained at different places for more than a year and raped repeatedly. On June 4, 2009, she was handed over to police on the false allegation of robbery and put in their custody. Four policemen also raped and tortured her.

After her release, Assiya decided to go public and fight back despite limited resources and threats from her rapists. She was eventually able to convince her family to support her in taking her case to court. She wanted her abductors and the policemen prosecuted, so she came to MMWWO for help. MMWWO is currently supporting Assiya and her family by providing legal aid, medical treatment to Assiya and her father (her father is a cardiac patient), shelter and security.

Also, MMWWO has engaged two lawyers to work on Assiya's case, but despite the presence of all the records against the perpetrators, there have been no arrests. The kidnappers and police are still free, and no action has yet been taken against them. Instead, false charges have been raised against Assiya, her mother, father and other relatives in an attempt to put pressure on them to make a compromise—the traditional way of dealing with such issues in Pakistan; they are settled informally between the families involved.

Assiya and her family members are continuously threatened, as the perpetrators are policemen and the kidnappers have family ties to prominent politicians. But Assiya is determined to fight, and MMWWO stands firm in support of her and her family.



## Speaking Up

MMWWO's Community Volunteers Program recently organized speech competitions among female students, focusing on the rights of girls and women in 15 colleges in five districts of South Punjab.

The speech competitions were held in three girls' colleges of district Rajanpur, Sept. 9-11, 2009. Twenty-four contestants took part in the competitions and spoke on the following topics:

- Women and the inhumane practices in the Pakistani society
- The reasons why violence is perpetrated against women
- The education of girls: the need of the day

More than 200 students and 45 teachers attended the programs. Eight contestants spoke on each topic and three winners were awarded prizes.

The MMWWO volunteers included men and women from different walks of life, such as university students, journalists, lawyers, social workers and teachers.

Holding speech competitions on women's rights proved to be a unique and challenging activity. MMWWO faced multiple obstacles, including difficulty obtaining permission to enter the colleges as well as college administrators forbidding male staff members and volunteers to attend the programs. However, these first competitions were similar to the first drop of rain for women's rights in a region that is not conducive to the rights of girls and women.

## Never Give Up

Ten-year-old Amaal\*\* started her studies at Mukhtar Mai Girls Model School and is now determined to become a lawyer.

"I will fight for the girls subjected to violence," she says.

Amaal was admitted to the Mukhtar Mai Women's Shelter Home on July 20, 2009, after being raped by a neighbor. She belongs to a poor family from a remote area of Pakistan. On April 20, Amaal was helping her mother harvest the wheat crop and went to her neighbor's house to get some water. A married man living there raped her, disregarding her appeals for mercy, saying, "Please leave me—I am as your daughter."

Amaal remained in the hospital for eight days after the rape.

The police delayed the registration of a criminal case against the accused because he is related to an influential political figure in the area. Instead, false charges were filed against Amaal's parents to pressure them into dropping the case.

On May 22, Mukhtar Mai, president, and Naseem Akhtar, managing director of MMWWO, visited Amaal's house after news of her rape was published in the media. Mukhtar and Naseem gave Amaal and her family information about the services of MMWWO and invited Amaal to come to Meerwala, but the young girl decided to remain with her parents.

The accused continued to put pressure on Amaal's family; they tried to kidnap and kill her as well. Eventually, her family decided to move Amaal to Meerwala. MMWWO is now providing security for Amaal, as well as legal support for her case. Appeals have been sent to the authorities, but the accused has still not been arrested.

Amaal had never been to school before, but while in Meerwala she has been given admission at Mukhtar Mai Girls Model School—with a new uniform and books. She has learned the English alphabet and has a smile on her face when reciting her ABCs.



A typical class at MMWWO, the first schooling Amaal has received.