

16 September 2013

For Immediate Release: Joint statement on the assassination of Sushmita Banerjee and the alarming increase in VAW in Afghanistan

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), the Violence is Not our Culture Campaign (VNC), and the Women Living under Muslim Laws international solidarity network (WLUML) strongly condemn the killing of Indian writer and activist Sushmita Banerjee outside her home in Paktika Province, Afghanistan. On 4th September, 2013 Banerjee was beaten and abducted from her home and her body was found the next day riddled with more than 20 bullets. It is reported that she was targeted by Taliban-affiliated militants because of her [memoirs](#) about surviving house arrest and a death sentence imposed by the Taliban in 1995, and possibly because she had recently installed an internet connection in her home, which her attackers claimed was intended for [spying](#) for India.

The killing of Banerjee follows an alarming increase in targeted assassinations and attempts on the lives of women's rights activists and women in prominent positions, as well as more widespread cases of femicide and violence against women and girls and a general deterioration in the security situation in Afghanistan. The recent murders highlight the risks to women in public life and the Afghan government's failure to protect women under threat. Last month, female senator Rouh Gul Khirzad was attacked and injured by Taliban militants.¹ Several family members were with her, and her 8-year-old daughter and her bodyguard were killed in the attack. In July last year, Islam Bibi, a 37 year-old police lieutenant and the most senior female officer in southern [Afghanistan's](#) dangerous Helmand province, was riding a motorcycle to work [when she was shot and killed](#). Her killers remain unknown. Attacks on girls' schools, and violations of the rights of individual girls and women in the home continue with impunity.²

We are gravely concerned that this violence is escalating and being perpetuated with total disregard for seeking accountability for the victims and survivors of these crimes. There has been little attempt by authorities to bring those responsible to justice, even when the perpetrators of such crimes have been clearly identified. Moreover, the police and judicial authorities are often themselves directly complicit in the violence taking place.³ The failure of the State to establish the rule of law and protect its population

¹ There have been numerous high profile assassinations and attempts on the lives of prominent women in the past year:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/13/us-afghanistan-women-idUSBRE97C08220130813>

<http://www.awid.org/Library/Female-Afghan-MP-taken-hostage-officials>

<http://www.awid.org/Library/Afghan-woman-senator-injured-in-Taliban-ambush>

<http://www.awid.org/Library/Afghanistan-Women-in-parliament-receive-threats-from-fellow-lawmakers>

² Beyond those women targeted because they are public figures, schoolgirls and women and girls in the domestic sphere are also increasingly becoming targets of violence and femicide, as documented by various groups such as the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations.

<http://www.awid.org/Library/Stoning-The-case-of-Afghanistan>

<http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/11373-aihr-raises-concern-over-increasing-violence-against-women-in-afghanistan>

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/19/taliban-targeting-women-un-report>

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/16/afghanistan-escalating-setbacks-women>

³ Even the police and judicial authorities are complicit at times.

<http://www.awid.org/Library/Afghan-Police-Accused-of-Violence-Against-Women>

in the face of murder, brutality, violence and threats emboldens the forces of extremism, fundamentalism and terror, resulting in dire consequences for women and girls in particular.

In light of this institutional failure and the resurgent growth in power of the Taliban insurgents and other armed Islamist groups, women's and [human rights](#) groups and observers both [within](#) and [outside](#) the country are [expressing](#) their grave [concerns](#) regarding what lies ahead. Many fear that with the handover of security to Afghan troops and the withdrawal of US and NATO forces, the escalation of violence will continue unabated, with women and children as the primary casualties.

Legislative and policy changes aimed at improving the lives of women and girls are also being targeted. For instance, the landmark 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women Law is under threat of being severely weakened by a proposed [revision](#) in parliament that [would](#) eliminate the minimum marriage age for girls, abolish shelters, and end criminal penalties for rape and domestic violence. A new law passed by the lower house of parliament could effectively end prosecutions for underage and forced marriages and domestic violence by banning victims and witnesses from testifying against family members in court. The parliament has also recently passed a revision of Afghanistan's Electoral Law, which reduces the quota set for women's representation in provincial councils by 5%. This downgrading of Afghanistan's commitment to women's rights is accompanied by growing and overt threats aimed at women in the parliament who are trying to resist this regression.

We urge the Government of Afghanistan to take the following actions:

1. Ensure that a thorough and transparent investigation of the assassination of Sushmita Banerjee is completed, as well as all other reported violations, and bring those responsible to justice;
2. Live up to its responsibility to protect all its population from human rights violations and take steps to effectively improve the security situation for all women and girls and of women human rights defenders so that they can continue their work without the fear of reprisals;
3. Immediately halt efforts to weaken legislation and policy aimed at protecting women's rights and improving the lives of women and girls, as well as put an end to the intimidation of those in parliament fighting to protect and advance these rights; and
4. Fulfill its commitment under the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework towards a "demonstrated implementation, with civil society engagement, of both the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law (EVAW), including through services to victims as well as law enforcement, and the implementation of the National Action Plan for Women (NAPWA)" as agreed by all parties concerned.⁴

We urge the international community along with the Government of Afghanistan to:

1. Guarantee the meaningful participation of women and the inclusion of their demands in the transition process ahead and in any discussions of peace and security; and
2. Live up to its commitments to protect women's rights in Afghanistan in collaboration and solidarity with Afghan women rights activists by ensuring that all assistance to Afghanistan will deliver concrete measures and programs that guarantee access to justice for all and, most importantly, the elimination of gender-based discrimination and violence against women and girls in the country.

<http://www.awid.org/Library/Afghanistan-Rising-numbers-of-women-jailed-for-moral-crimes-says-HRW>

⁴ In July 2012, Afghanistan and the international community agreed under the Tokyo Framework to "[i]mprove access to justice for all, in particular women, by ensuring that the Constitution and other fundamental laws are enforced expeditiously, fairly and transparently; [and] ensure that women can fully enjoy their economic, social, civil, political and cultural rights."

Signatories: