



Nominee for the 6th Annual Front Line Award, 2010

Dr. Soraya Rahim Sobhrang

Afghanistan

Dr. Soraya Rahim Sobhrang is the Commissioner for Women's Rights at the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, where she is responsible for promoting women's rights throughout Afghanistan. Her role is challenging and at times dangerous, given the negative attitude to women's rights that is widespread in Afghanistan.

A former gynecologist, she campaigns vociferously on the current practice of all-male tribal councils which have the power to decide the fate of women caught up in legal cases in many rural areas. In Afghanistan, women are routinely denied fundamental human rights because of their gender and the level of discrimination and persecution of Afghan women is critically high. They are beaten, raped, killed, forced into marriage and kept prisoner in their homes. Laws such as the Shia Personal Status Law and the National Reconciliation, General Amnesty and National Stability Law further undermine women's rights.

On a daily basis women and girls who have fled violence and forced marriages come to Dr. Soraya and the AIHRC seeking help and support, in a country where abandoning a husband and family-in-law – no matter how abusive – is still considered to be a crime.

According to the UN more than 87 per cent of Afghan women suffer from domestic abuse. Between 60 and 80 per cent of marriages are forced.

Dr. Soraya Sobhrang's work is not without its consequences and risks. Afghanistan is a very conservative society and working in the field of women's rights is extremely dangerous. Warlords and religious fundamentalists oppose the emergence of a human rights culture in Afghanistan and oppose women receiving any basic human rights.

As a women human rights defender and advocate of women's rights, Dr Soraya faces constant intimidation and threats. Women who push for better human rights face systematic violence and threats from the Taliban and other anti-government groups, as well as local warlords and militias.

The government does little to support women human rights defenders and sometimes actively hinders their work, detracting from the few but hard-won gains Afghan women have made since the fall of the Taliban.

In areas under the Taliban's influence, it is all but impossible for women human rights defenders to continue their work, as several high profile women have been attacked and killed. Often women human rights defenders in Afghanistan have faced death threats and kidnapping attempts against themselves and their families, as well as physical attacks, including horrendous acid attacks.

Working for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission provides a certain level of protection for Dr. Soraya Sobhrang, but in a country where powerful interests are forcibly seeking to silence those who speak out for women's rights she faces intimidation and attacks, including from the State, those allied with the Taliban and other anti-government forces.

For a number of years Dr Soraya has been receiving many threats. She uses a variety of different telephone numbers and SIM cards as a result of constant telephone threats. Due to the fact that she is high profile WHRD and regularly speaks out in the media she is often limited to travel between her home and her office, for fear of attacks. Dr Soraya travels in a car with blacked out windows to minimise the possibility of being identified in her car and attacked.

Front Line commends the courage and dedication of Dr. Soraya as she continues her legitimate and important work defending the rights of others.

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