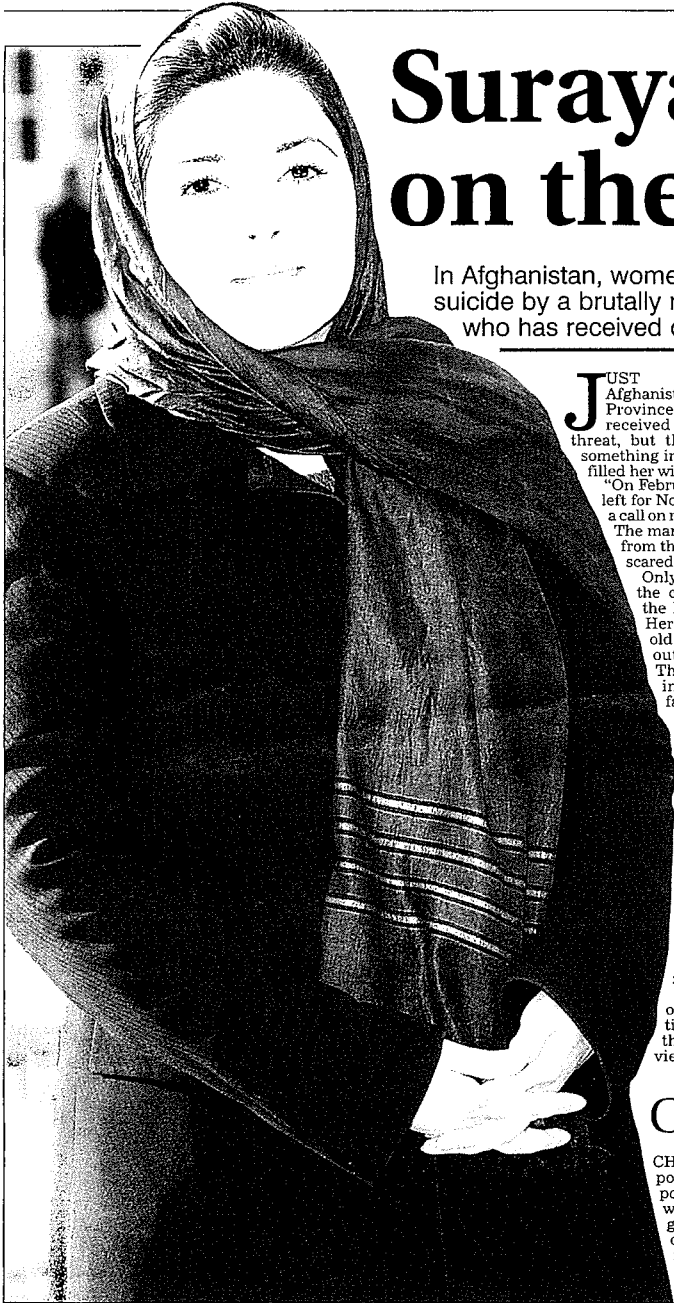


News

Suraya puts her life on the line for justice

In Afghanistan, women are given away as child brides, raped, beaten and forced into suicide by a brutally male-dominated society. **KATE CHAMBRÉ** talks to one woman who has received death threats for her courageous stance against injustice



CAMPAIGNER: Suraya Pakzad is the founder and director of 'Voice of Women'

JUST before leaving Afghanistan to travel to the Province, Suraya Pakzad received yet another death threat, but this time there was something in its deliverance that filled her with fear.

"On February 12, just before I left for Northern Ireland, I got a call on my way to the airport. The man was quoting verses from the Koran. I was really scared," she said.

Only a few days earlier in the city where she lives the District Governor of Herat and his 18-year-old son had been shot outside their home. The teenager died instantly but his father had a slow and painful death dying in hospital a couple of days ago.

Being a public figure in Afghanistan is understandably dangerous for a man, but this is something of an understatement for a woman trying to speak out against the brutal cultural traditions of her country, which regard women as second-class citizens.

There have been only a handful of times so far in my life that I have interviewed a person so

courageous and inspiring as Suraya who under the auspices of Christian Aid is currently in the Province (her first visit to the UK) highlighting the plight of women in Afghanistan.

Next month she will head to Washington to receive a 2008 Women of Courage award from the world's most powerful woman, Dr. Condoleezza Rice.

Suraya is one of just eight women in the world, and the only Asian this year, to win the coveted award.

It has been a long and difficult journey for Suraya, 37, who entered into an arranged marriage in Kabul at the tender age of 14 to a man 13 years her senior.

They have three daughters and three sons, her eldest being 22 years old. She insists that her children are driven to school and college in case they fall prey to kidnappers.

I ask her if she is terrified of meeting the same fate as the former Pakistan opposition leader Benazir Bhutto who was assassinated at the end of last year.

"Sometimes I am thinking these death threats aren't serious and are just words but sometimes I am really scared."

Her marriage is highly unusual in comparison to most Afghanistani women because her husband treats her with respect, not only encouraging but supporting the charitable work she does which is supported by Christian Aid.

In 1998 Suraya founded the Voice of Women Organisation (VWO) during the most difficult period of the Taliban regime.

"With the support of a few Afghan men and women, the organisation car-

ried out very small activities underground such as basic education projects for marginalized women and girls. VWO gradually expanded and we now have three offices in different locations of the western province," she said.

The charity's main goal is to strive for the freedom and empowerment of women in Afghan societies through the stipulations mapped out in the resolutions of the United Nations.

Suraya believes Afghanistan will never truly prosper without the contributions of its female population.

"First of all the problems of women must be addressed to improve their status in social, cultural and financial terms by promoting human rights, women's rights and providing legal and social assistance to them."

She explains that in the period of four-and-a-half years since the fall of the Taliban, there has been considerable change in the legal and institutional framework concerning the situation of women in Afghanistan but there is still some way to go.

Despite the positive steps forward she warns that violence against women remains "dramatic in its intensity and frequency" in both public and private spheres of life in Afghanistan.

Child marriages, she explains, are the primary source of violence against women. Giving little girls away in return for a dowry (bride money) and exchanging daughters to settle disputes are common practices in her culture.

If you would like to support Christian Aid and the work it is doing to help women in Afghanistan please call 028 90 38 1204 or log on to www.christianaid.ie

Christian Aid gets message across

CHRISTIAN AID's purpose is to eradicate poverty and its causes wherever the need is greatest, regardless of politics, race or religion.

The Methodist Church in Ireland is working together with the charity on

a three-year programme helping a number of Afghan organisations find their own solutions to poverty.

Currently Suraya Pakzad, the founder of Afghanistan's Voice of Women Organization, is in Northern Ireland as a guest of Christian Aid

raising public awareness about the plight of women in Afghanistan.

Victor Henriquez Appeals Co-ordinator for Christian Aid said he hoped Suraya's visit would help men and women here understand the hardships people have to endure.

Mr Henriquez said: "Suraya's visit is vital to help us, our supporters and the public in Northern Ireland understand better that extreme poverty is not only an effect of the current crisis, but also the cause of ongoing instability in the region."



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