

## Malala Yousafzai: Epitome of fight against religious oppression of women

*Asian Human Rights Commission*

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The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) takes great pleasure in congratulating Malala Yousafzai on the occasion of being awarded the Nobel Prize for female education. Beginning her struggle as a child, Malala defied religious extremism of the worst kind in Pakistan and continued to demand that girls be allowed to receive education, for which she was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman in 2012. Malala miraculously survived the cold blooded murder attempt and continued her tireless efforts to be the voice on behalf of all women to claim the right to an education.

Today, Malala is no longer a lone voice in the fight for women's education and against religious extremism. The world stands with her in her struggle to win education for women in Pakistan. While congratulating her on her unparalleled achievement, the AHRC believes that Malala will gain more strength and commitment towards continuing the struggle for women's education and rights not only in Pakistan, but throughout the world.

It is a rarity in Pakistani society for girls to speak for themselves, let alone stand up for the rights of others. Malala is an exception to that rule, a rule imposed by a male dominant society that believes in subjugating and oppressing women. Malala's courage and valor has today inspired many to carve a destiny for themselves. The journey of the youngest Nobel laureate was unlike many teens her age; from a very young age she had the passion that ignited her resolve to fight against extremist elements. In 2007 the Taliban literally took hold of the Swat valley—a pristine tourist destination in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Northwest Pakistan—and passed an edict banning girls' education. Hundreds of schools were blown up as a result. Only 10-years-old at that time, Malala chronicled her experience of living under Taliban rule under the pseudonym Gul Makai, and her diary was later published by the BBC's Urdu Service.



*Malala Yousafzai attends a special event entitled, "Delivering on the Global Education Promise". UN Photo/Amanda Voisardb*

A basic human right, the right to education is a privilege for many children in Pakistan. Malala stood as a symbol of that fight against oppression and tyranny in the name of religion. Refusing to bow down to the whims and fancies of a few obscurantists' view of Islam, Malala risked her life for the cause of girls' education; she was shot in the head by two men who stopped her school van. She was easily identifiable as she was the only one not covering her face. The twisted norms of Pakistan's patriarchal society dictate that a good woman is one who suffers in silence and endures every hardship meted out to her without complaining. In a society where the birth of a girl is neither celebrated nor acknowledged, girls find themselves at the mercy of their fathers or brothers who are considered the 'demi Gods of their fate'. Malala was fortunate to have a father who understood the paradigm of genders and encouraged her to break free. Mr. Ziaudin Yousafzai, in his speech at Ted Talk 2014 said "Why is my daughter so strong? Because I didn't clip her wings." A visionary educationist, Mr. Ziaudin told the rapt audience, "I taught my

girl students to unlearn the lesson of obedience. I taught my boy students to unlearn the lesson of so-called pseudo-honor."

Malala has won 16 major international awards for her service to human rights and justice before winning the Nobel Peace Prize this year. In 2011, Malala was one of the five nominees chosen out of 98 children put forward by organizations and individuals from 42 different countries for the consideration of the Nobel Peace Prize selection committee. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, himself a Nobel Peace Laureate, announced the five nominees for the International Children's Peace Prize in 2011 in Cape Town. The prize is an initiative of the Dutch organization 'Kids Rights' and was launched during the 2005 Nobel Peace Laureates' Summit chaired by Mikhail Gorbachev. That year, Michaela Mycroft (17) from South Africa was awarded the Children's Peace Prize. Today Malala is the youngest ever Nobel Prize winner.

Malala is the second Pakistani after Dr. Abdul Salam to have brought the accolade home. Dr. Salam was never given the respect he duly deserved, his crime being an Ahmedi. Despite many physics research centers around the world being named after him, not a single street was named after him in Pakistan. Hailed as the shining star of physics, making quantum physics a household name, Dr. Salam is a nameless soldier in the annals of Pakistani history. Malala too elicits a mixed response from the masses in Pakistan divided in their views about her as a champion of human and women's rights, or a media darling wishing to malign Pakistan as an extremist state harboring the Taliban. The increasing Talibanization and intolerance for dissent has eroded the moral fabric of the society that has been the birthplace of luminaries like Bullah Shah, Sachal Sarmast, Moinudin Chisti and other sages who preached an egalitarian social order.

Over the past decades in Pakistan, many attacks have been carried out by orthodox forces on students, educational institutions and academic staff. A series of terrorist attacks on school buses, students, teachers, and institutions took place in Pakistan in order to create a serious fear among the youth of getting an education. Fundamentalist groups oppose education since it provides people, youth especially, with powerful means for intellectual independence, social advancement and personal emancipation. Fundamentalists use the weapon of terrorism as a tool to stop Pakistani young people from getting a secular education, through which they can potentially develop alternative reasoning. They have not only targeted institutions, but also individual teachers and university students. In a recent attack on a university in June last year, 14 female students were killed and another 20 were injured when a female suicide bomber from the religious terrorist group Lashkare- Jhangvi blew herself up, in a bus in Quetta, Balochistan.

Malala raised a lone voice to draw attention to the plight of thousands of men, women and children who were being exploited and abused at the hands of the mighty. She rose where many feared for their lives, she spoke when speaking was a crime, she struggled when it was punishable for women to be seen in public. No common teen, Malala was a warrior like the Pakhtun freedom fighter Malalai of Maiwand, whom she was named after. The Taliban failed to silence her and she went on to become the symbol of struggle for girls' right to education. She has been extolled for her persistence and fortitude by many politicians, celebrities and human rights activists who believe in equal rights for all, regardless of gender, creed or race. In December 2012, Pakistan and UNESCO unveiled the Malala Plan, which aims to have all girls in the world attend school by the end of 2015.

While speaking at the UN General Assembly, Malala said,

"I speak - not for myself, but for all girls and boys. I raise up my voice - not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard. Those who have fought for their rights: Their right to live in peace. Their right to be treated with dignity. Their right to equality of opportunity. Their right to be educated."

