



Suraya Pakzad, recently named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world, is coming to Philadelphia in March of 2010

Pakzad, founder and executive of the Voice of Women Organization (VWO) established in 1998, was recently presented the 2008 International Women of Courage award by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for her determination in raising gender awareness in order to support the rights Afghan women. She is also the recipient of the 2009 Voice of Peace Award, which honors her heroic work in support of Afghan women and her promotion of their rights and voice. The award announcement calls Suraya a great role model for Peace X Peace members and women peace builders everywhere. Added to her collection of awards, Suraya also received the Top State Medal Malalai in recognition of her tireless efforts for the betterment of women's education and women's

lives. Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai conferred Suraya this prestigious award in commemorate the champion of the 1880 Maiwand War. In March of 2009 Suraya received, from The City Council of the City of Philadelphia, a proclamation recognizing her for her timeless dedication to improve the lives of Afghan women. These prestigious recognitions of her efforts of providing women with shelter, job-training and support has made Pakzad a noted public figure, placing Pakzad at higher levels of risk in a country where extremists have been known to target those that are most active in fighting for women's rights.

In the eyes of these extremists, any move towards changing the status-quo of women, commonly regarded as second-class citizens, threatens to upset the soil of deeply embedded cultural norms. At least three very prominent and courageous Afghan women have been assassinated in recent years for giving voice to the voiceless.

VWO initially started as an underground movement in Herat province, in northwestern part of Afghanistan during which the Taliban still maintained its oppressive rule. Upon the ousting of the Taliban in 2001, one of Pakzad and VWO's main achievements was to give Afghan women political voice and power by teaching them how to organize themselves in order to vote during the Afghan elections. Additionally, VWO helps to create education, health, and food centers, small-business empowerment programs, shelters, and legal services for abused women. Moreover, VWO also seeks constructive partnerships in order to take steps towards building sustainable and healthy communities; an alliance between VWO and Traveling Mercies has helped to provide basic necessities and create sustainable water infrastructure for the province of Herat.

Guided and inspired by the United Nations resolution on Women's and Human Rights, to which Afghanistan is a signatory, VWO's mission is to "improve the status of Afghan women and their communities as a whole in the social, cultural and financial context by promoting human and women's rights, by promoting indigenous and culturally appropriate technologies and expertise, by providing education, legal and social assistance, and by increasing awareness in order to develop and nurture Afghan women's capacities for voice, participation and action in propelling their own success."

Traveling Mercies (www.travelingmercies.org) and its supporting partners like the Philadelphia Global Water Initiative (www.pgwi.org) have the honor of hosting Suraya Pakzad to assist her in her upcoming mission of building a Voice of Women Organization office in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. During Suraya's visit to Philadelphia, she will be offering extensive workshops and seminars on conflict resolutions, her work in supporting women's rights, communal water infrastructures, and her plans of action here in Philadelphia. To learn more, visit www.vwo.org.af or www.travelingmercies.org

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