

14.5.85

NEWSLETTER...FREE IQBAL BEGUM CAMPAIGN

IQBAL FREED!

Amidst great rejoicing by her friends, Iqbal Begum was freed by the Appeal Court on Monday 22nd April in London. Behind that moment of intense relief, joy and excitement lay hard work by many people who supported the campaign over the past year. We would like to thank everyone who gave their time, energy, donations, sent letters of support and helped Iqbal and us to keep fighting for her release.

Over the year of the campaign, we became increasingly aware of the extent to which black women are still an invisible presence in this country. We all know of the overt ways in which various institutions discriminate against us but the campaign felt it was important to share what we learnt of the subtle ways in which Iqbal was humiliated. Hers was not an isolated case.

We chose to look at three areas: our experience of visiting Iqbal in prison; legal treatment and the appeal.

PRISON VISITS

Five/six black women from the campaign visited Iqbal while she was at Styal Prison near Manchester. We found that like many other prisoners Iqbal had to work in the sewing room earning £5 per week. When she said she didn't want to work she was told that her visits would be stopped.

There are numerous rules and bits of paper that need to be filled in to get things done. The prison officers refused to believe that Iqbal didn't speak, write, read English. We were not allowed to fill in forms on her behalf so we often saw her in the same clothes. You have to fill in a form to get a new change of clothes from the stores.

She was allowed no halal meat. The ration per prisoner for meat is 62p per week. She had no time for prayers. After several visits we got her a cassette recorder but it was difficult to replace the batteries. She couldn't talk to her doctor because there was no common language. Worse of all, she had no one to chat with.

LEGAL TREATMENT

Iqbal's original solicitor and barristers did not put up a case in her defence. Not only did they accept an interpreter who had clearly stated that he did not speak Iqbal's language but Mr. Barnett, the solicitor, gave Iqbal no advice which would enable her to make an informed plea. The assumption that when she said 'gulti' she meant the English word guilty shows clearly the courts' arrogance and disregard for Iqbal's rights.

The Law Society will be investigating Mr. Barnett. Iqbal hasn't yet decided whether to take her complaint any further.

### THE APPEAL...RETRIAL OR ANOTHER FARCE?

After leave to appeal out of time was granted, Iqbal spent a further 6 months imprisonment before her case was heard.

On 18th April, 3 judges presided over the case. Lord Gifford, our barrister, talked for about 2 hours illustrating the ways in which Iqbal's rights were ignored. However, he concentrated mainly on the question of interpretation which was a disappointment to us.

The prosecution did not contest what was said and the judges appeared to be sympathetic to Iqbal being obviously disturbed by what they heard. The public gallery was packed and we were confident that Iqbal would be released. The case was adjourned for lunch.

After lunch the atmosphere inside the court changed. We feel that this was because the judges were aware that about 100 people were outside the courts, giving out leaflets, chanting slogans, and because Central tv were present.

The judges declared that Iqbal's trial in 1981 was null and void since no adequate plea was entered on her behalf. The case was adjourned for final judgement on Monday 22nd. She was refused bail, no reasons were given. We were so shocked after they said all this that we sat silently for several minutes while the news sank in. Iqbal was taken away.

### THREE DAYS IN HOLLOWAY

Iqbal spent that weekend in Holloway Prison, London. Even her solicitor was not told where she was until the next day. The prison authorities did not know what her status was. She was not seen as a remand prisoner. She was not allowed a long open visit and food could not be taken in to her.

When 3 women from the campaign went to see Iqbal on Sunday 21st, they had to use a visiting order (as though Iqbal was a convicted prisoner) and could only stay with her for an hour. They could not take her food and although they explained that Iqbal could not fill in the forms, were not allowed to do this on her behalf. They were viewed as trouble makers!

### SENTENCING

On 22nd April the judges decided to turn the appeal court into a Crown court (a rarely used procedure) so that Iqbal could be re-tried before one judge. Iqbal decided to plead guilty to manslaughter. The prosecution, defence put their case. After all this, the judge read out a prepared statement. The whole thing was a charade.



The judge said that if Iqbal had been properly tried in 1981, and he had been the judge, he would have given her a 6 year sentence. She had already served four years and justice would be seen to be done if she was immediately released. Amid loud applause, Iqbal was released.

Despite all this, it was many hours before Iqbal finally left the court. Papers had to be signed, procedure gone through.

Although Iqbal was released, the campaign knows that judgement on her was harsh. By finding Iqbal guilty of manslaughter, the judge made it very difficult for her to claim compensation. With the growing awareness by the courts of domestic violence, we know of many cases where women have been given light or even suspended sentences after pleading guilty to manslaughter. We believe that Iqbal suffered like this because she is a black woman. How many more are there who are given the same kind of inhumane treatment?

#### WHAT PRICE FREEDOM?

Iqbal's first statement was that she wanted to see her sons. She could not wait to get to Birmingham. However, things have not been easy for the family. Her children, who hardly saw her during her imprisonment are undecided as to whether they want to live with or not. Iqbal and her children will need a period of adjustment.

Iqbal's probation officer has not been totally helpful in creating an atmosphere which would allow reconciliation to take place. She blames the campaign "a posse of women" for the present situation.

#### THE CAMPAIGN

We continue to meet regularly. We have decided to put on a social so women can meet and talk with Iqbal. If you come from outside Birmingham we can put women up for the night. Please phone to arrange this.

SOCIAL.....SOCIAL.....SOCIAL.....SOCIAL.....

.....8th JUNE 1985. ....8pm-11.30pm.

.....TINDAL STREET SCHOOL, TINDAL STREET, BALSALL HEATH

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