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FREE IQBAL BEGUM

"Iqbal is suffering this injustice because she is a woman and because she is black. There have been numerous cases where white women accused of the same crime have been freed."

A campaign has been set up to ensure that Iqbal Begum suffers no longer from the gross injustice served against her life by the legal system

She has suffered due to a total lack of concern by both the legal system and her family and friends to safeguard her rights. As a woman her life is considered to be of little importance. As the campaign has developed this attitude has been reflected by people's comments when we gave out leaflets for our 1st Public Meeting.

RESPONSES

1. *"Iqbal's husband must have had a reason for beating her"*

Why must a woman endure violence? Its not a question of if she was to blame for his behavior but that there can be no justification for consistent violence and mental torture.

2. *"She should've sought help"*

Exactly what is open to a black woman suffering from domestic violence

- a) police inaction
- b) police reluctance to interfere even when injunctions have been granted
- c) police attitudes that accept male version of events. A man's authority should not be crossed,

no matter what he does
Who could Iqbal have turned to for support or refuge?

The state, which operates through its racist ideology?

The community - who would see her as overstepping her limits as a woman?
it is so often expected of us to suffer in silence.

The fact domestic violence is a woman's issue has been reflected in the development of the campaign.

The initial action was taken by women. The campaign today, with the exception of one man is all women.

Men have ventured to offer their opinions, antagonist either about how the campaign should be run or about Iqbal's actions.

Furthermore concealed threats have been made against Iqbal's life would she be released. One man who attended one meeting expressed it all when he said words to the effect that *"if she was released it would set an example to our wives that they can do the same thing and get away with it"*.

We are tired of hearing men say what about her husband?

1 We say what about Iqbal's suffering in the past and what she has to endure now.

Iqbal's story

Iqbal Begum is a 41 year old Kashmiri woman found guilty of 'murder' in 1981 by Birmingham Crown Court. She has served 3 years of her life sentence and is at present at Styal Prison near Manchester.

1981 THE BACKGROUND

She lived in Washwood Heath - a part of Birmingham with a large Kashmiri community. She was the 2nd wife of Mr. Sharif and they had 4 sons, aged 11, 10, 8, 7 years. Iqbal also had a 13 year old step-daughter.

We know from talking to her that for 6 months prior to the death of Mr Sharif in a domestic fight there had been other occasions when there had been physical violence towards her by her husband. Also she had been treated for depression in the past by her GP.

MAY 81

On the day Mr Sharif died of injuries in the local hospital, there was a quarrel over two of their sons. Iqbal was frightened and thought that her husband was going to hit them so much that the children and herself would have been killed. That is why it is believed by us she brought an iron bar and defended herself.

She, herself took the brother-in-law to the room where Mr Sharif lay wounded who then called the ambulance. Mr Sharif died later in the local hospital of the injuries and Iqbal was taken to the local police station in Bromford Road.

POLICE - LAW - SOCIAL SERVICES

Police were sufficiently worried by her state of shock to contact a doctor as well as a duty solicitor. However they proceeded to get a statement from Iqbal, written in Punjabi, even though she speaks Mirpuri, reads Urdu script and could not understand much English.

The 4 sons were taken to the police station too and although they could speak good English had their passports checked to confirm dates of births. They were initially put in a residential school but for most of the past 3 years have been with their Uncle, Iqbal's brother-in-law.

Although they are being well cared for they are living in an overcrowded house. There are 10 people at present in a small 3 bed-roomed terraced house in Alum Rock. All attempts to get the family re-housed by the Council have failed. Reason given is that it is privately owned and that is the rule. It would have cost the Social Services a great deal of money if they been taken in care and put in children's homes.

The duty solicitor assigned to her was Mr. P. Barnett. He seemed to have accepted Iqbal as guilty by accepting the police version of events. Even though Birmingham Woman's Aid tried to change the solicitor to a more sympathetic one he refused. It's a catch 22 situation: unless the prisoner asks for the change of solicitor nothing can happen. Iqbal however was in such a state she remained silent throughout 2/3 interviews with him. What he should have done in the court was to ask the judge to discharge him as he was to ask the judge to discharge him as he could not get instructions. **He Proceeded.**

He managed to get an interpreter who spoke Gujarathi rather than Mirpuri Iqbal speaks and what's more he was not even an official interpreter.

The Campaign feels however that the main problem is total disregard for justice and lack of preparation of her background by the solicitor reflects his racism. The onus should never be placed on an interpreter - official or otherwise - to make legal points clear to a non-English speaker.

TRIAL OR FARCE - GUILTY OR GULTI?

Trial, if it could be called a trial, was held in Birmingham Crown Court in October. It lasted 20 minutes. An interpreter wasn't sworn in.

Until then Iqbal hadn't said anything at all to her lawyer or barrister. In that case they should have asked to get themselves discharged, a correct court procedure.

When Iqbal, under pressure being isolated muttered guilty (the word means mistake in Urdu) her lawyers were totally surprised and took it to mean 'Guilty'. The judge commented at the time, "I think she is pleading guilty". Even then Mr Barnett and the Barrister could have asked for adjournment to prepare a detailed case. **They didn't.**

Since then he has tried to persuade all the people who have contacted him to give up trying to help her as she was guilty of murdering her husband.

APPEAL - HER RIGHT

At present a Queen's Council has been briefed on Iqbal's case. He has been asked to draft the grounds for the leave to appeal out of time. Once leave is granted the case will be heard in Court of Appeal in London

The campaign

HOW WE FOUND OUT ABOUT IQBAL BEGUM

For several years myself and Pam have worked as volunteers in a refuge for women and children, who are escaping from violent husbands and boy-friends.

We were horrified to read an article in the Birmingham Evening Mail in 1981 about Iqbal Begum. The article said she had received life-imprisonment for killing her husband and the trial had lasted 15 minutes - the shortest ever in England for a long time, apparently. Only a few weeks before we had read an article about a white woman who had killed her husband in self defence and had been set free.

From our experience working with battered women, we immediately suspected that she had been forced to act in self-defence.

I rang an Asian acquaintance who made enquiries and discovered that both, she and children had been beaten by him, on many occasions.

We rang her solicitor who was extremely unsympathetic about her and fairly hostile to us. He was not interested in the possibility of her being battered.

We contacted the Asian Resource Centre and the Commission for Racial Equality. The CRE found out that her interpreter was also biased and not very sympathetic. A woman from the CRE visited Iqbal in prison but found her in such a depressed state that she was virtually unable to speak.

After a lot of discussion and attempts to try and do something to help her, we met a group of Asian women working in a refuge in the North of England. They offered to visit her in prison and continue the attempt to help her to get justice.

We are very glad that the campaign has now been started in Birmingham at last

Ellen Singer & Pam Bloor

PUBLICITY

To date the campaign has had publicity in the white racist press, nationally and locally, and an Asian radio programme reaching most areas in the West Midlands.

We are now approaching the black press to draw Iqbal's struggle to their attention. Our priority is to publicise this issue amongst the black community, and to build up support for women's issues at the same time. The original publicity was initiated by a white national paper where the coverage portrayed Iqbal as a sensational case of a submissive woman, who had been victimised by 'bad interpretation' in court. The publicity we demand must be on our own terms so that the real issues will be discussed. That is —

Iqbal is the victim of the racist and sexist system. It is because she is a woman and above all a black woman that she is now suffering in prison for a lifetime.

It is not a case of 'bad interpretation' but of racism, the racism of the whole legal system. An interpreter can only act in accordance to the instructions received. In this case the racist lawyer and judge did not ask the interpreter to interpret anything of substance to the case.

This campaign is a political one in that we are fighting against all forms of violence against women. Not surprisingly none of these points have been made in the publicity to date but we hope that the black press will take up the issue more realistically and make the points the campaign wants made.

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PUBLIC MEETING 21st JULY 1984

The first Free Iqbal Begum campaign meeting was held in July at Smallheath Community Centre. It was attended by well over 50 people.

Although few of the local community it was successful in that the campaign was able to assess what had been achieved so far and what still needed to be done.

The following things were felt to be priorities

- 1) Re-establishing contact between Iqbal and her children.
- 2) To speed up the legal process.
- 3) Increase public awareness of Iqbal's case
- 4) To attempt to gain the support both of her family (in-laws) and the local community.
- 5) To improve her conditions in prison.

Of these aims the last two have proved most difficult to achieve. Her in laws have on the whole rejected her and there is a split in the local black community. This has prohibited any attempts to reunite her with her children. Also prison conditions are difficult to criticise openly as this may have repercussions for her in prison.

The other speaker at the meeting was Margaret Parchment who gave a great deal of info as to prison conditions and showed the debilitating impact of living in an institution has on an individual and the importance of support upon coming out of prison. Iqbal has a hard life ahead of her when she gets freed.

The next public meeting will be held in November. We will publicise the details later. We hope you will come and support the campaign.



In January, 1983, Margaret Parchment, a 43 year old grandmother was sentenced to 2 years imprisonment for allegedly wounding a police woman with intent. A year later she was released after an appeal hearing. Although the Margaret Parchment campaign believe her to be innocent, the charge was not dropped.

Mrs. Parchment was one more victim of the state's judicial system that currently keeps 3000 women in prison, most of them for petty offences.

At Iqbal Begum's public meeting Mrs. Parchment described her experience. She feels it was one where she was subjected to ridicule on the grounds of her Rastafarian beliefs. The judge when sentencing her, referred to her as "pathetic". In prison she had to struggle for the right to a decent vegetarian diet. However, little effort was made to accommodate her dietary needs. As a consequence she was reduced to living off a very basic unbalanced diet. The enforced separation from her family caused her the most pain. Prison visits which were short and emotionally difficult did not compensate for the loss of her active involvement with her family.

Listening to Mrs. Parchment recall her horrendous experience, makes one wonder about the plight of Iqbal in prison.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP THE CAMPAIGN

Raise funds: cheques or PO payable to FIBC

Sell this bulletins

Talk to your friends, family, groups or organisations about Iqbal's case

*Send letters to Iqbal via ARC (address below)
If in English, these will be translated into Urdu*

If you live in London, attend the picket of the Court when her appeal is heard.

Invite women from the campaign to speak at meetings

**WE MEET ON MONDAYS, 7.30pm, at IMMIGRATION
AID UNIT, ALUM ROCK ROAD-WASHWOOD HEATH
ROAD CORNER, Come and attend**

For further information, donations, affiliations contact

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