

Justice for women in prison

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Afghan women face many problems including lack of access to justice. Women are often imprisoned for ‘moral crimes’ such as extramarital sexual relations, and many have their children living with them in prison.

Christian Aid partner **Afghan Women’s Education Centre**, AWEC, provides **legal support, education and income generation** schemes to help the women seek **justice** and freedom, and to support themselves and their families while in prison and after they’re released.

Maria, 19, was born in Faryab province in northern Afghanistan to a poor family. By the age of 11 she was already married, but her husband left soon afterwards to work in Iran and she was left alone with his family.

‘Three years later I was raped by my brother-in-law and I fell pregnant,’ she recalls. ‘My in-laws did not believe my innocence and I was charged with the “moral crime” of extramarital relations. I had no money so I could not contest the charges.’

For this ‘moral crime’ Maria was sentenced to six years in prison. The brother-in-law was also sent to prison but he had money to pay off the court.

This is the stark reality for many Afghan women, where access to justice remains out of reach.

‘Men have more support. They earn money, are supported by families, businesses, friends and the communities. They can pay to be released. Women have less support. Many are uneducated and we work to improve their situation,’ explains AWEC’s provincial manager Khalidah Aimaq.

Maria’s case is emblematic of many other women’s situations. AWEC managed to reduce her sentence and win her release. ‘In the prison I learnt to read and write and do embroidery, all thanks to AWEC. Now I can earn around £15-£30 a month through my embroidery to support my son.’

Shinkai Kharokail, an Afghan MP and founder-director of AWEC explains why it is vital to help women such as Maria.

‘Working inside a prison is very important as the women prisoners are very vulnerable – rejected by their families and also by society. They need help in preparing for their future life, beyond prison.’

‘They need help in reading and writing to give them hope, so they can help their children and find a way to live in society.’

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