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STATEMENT FROM THE WOMEN'S COALITION FOR PEACE

The Women's Coalition for Peace strongly condemns the cold-blooded murder of Samia Sarwar—a woman who had been physically abused and tortured for many years by her husband and was seeking a divorce—and the issuing of a fatwa calling for the death of two women lawyers who were providing legal aid to Ms Sarwar, in Pakistan.

On April 6th 1999, twenty nine-year old Samia Sarwar was deliberately murdered with the connivance of her parents and paternal uncle in the office of her counsel, Hina Jilani of AGHS, a well-known legal aid and human rights group in Lahore run by Hina Jilani and her sister, Asma Jahangir, Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and UN Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Killings. Though the murder was reported to the police no arrests have been made so far despite members of the Peshawar Chamber of Commerce, of which the Ms Sarwar's father is chairman, publicly stating that this 'honour killing' was in accordance with religious and tribal traditions. Meanwhile, the Sarwar family with the support of religious dignitaries is orchestrating a campaign to threaten the lives of Ms Sarwar's lawyers and other supporters of women's rights by declaring them 'kafirs' (non-believers). At present, local ulema have issued a fatwa calling on all believers to kill Hina Jilani and Asma Jahangir.

This gruesome murder illustrates the degree of brutalisation within society where parents can plan and execute the murder of their daughter for daring to exercise her rights as sanctioned by both law and religion. What is even more shocking is the way in which 'honour' is used as a justification for crimes of extreme violence against women; it compels us to question the values we uphold in the name of tradition and to scrutinise the oppressive and inhumane social norms that transform homes into places of violence and danger.

By taking no effective action against those responsible for the so-called honour killing of a young woman seeking her legal rights as well as by remaining silent in the face of blatant incitements to murder her legal counsel, the government of Pakistan has displayed a shocking indifference to the fundamental rights of women. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the government of Pakistan cannot hide behind the lame excuse of cultural norms and traditional practices which violate women's rights.

The Women's Coalition for Peace calls upon the government of Pakistan to send a clear signal that such gross violations of human rights and women's rights will no longer be tolerated. As a first step, the government of Pakistan must ensure that the perpetrators of Ms Sarwar's murder are arrested and brought to justice as well as guarantee the safety of all those involved in supporting and protecting women's rights. The government of Pakistan must also bring criminal charges against all those who issue threats as well as encourage others to harass, attack or kill human rights and women's rights activists. A review of the laws which make honour killings virtually punishment-free must also be undertaken as soon as possible.