

Asma Jahangir

Lawyer, Human Rights Activist and Chairperson, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan



A lawyer by profession and a leading vibrant human rights activist, Asma Jilani Jahangir was born in 1952 in Lahore. She did her BA from Kinnaird College, Lahore and her LLB from Punjab University. She also holds Honorary Doctorates in Law from University of Saint Gallen, Switzerland, Queen's University, Canada and Amherst College, United States of America.

Asma learned the business of law and politics at an early age. Her father, Malik Jilani, was a colonel in the Pakistan Army who entered politics upon retirement and spent much of his life in and out of prison for his political views which included open criticism of actions of Pakistani military in Bangladesh. Asma was eighteen when she filed her first petition to have her father released from jail and started working with lawyers for his defense. That was in 1972; in a landmark judgment ten years later she won her case.

In 1980, soon after her LLB, Asma Jahangir and her sister, Hina Jilani, got together with a few fellow activists and lawyers and formed the first law firm established by women in Pakistan - AGHS (Law firm) Legal Aid Cell. They also helped form the Women's Action Forum (WAF) in the same year. The first WAF demonstration was in 1983 when some 25-50 women took to the streets protesting the famous Safia Bibi case, a young blind girl who was gang-raped and then, grotesquely, charged with zina (adultery). Asma with her fellow activists managed to overturn her death sentence.

Ever since then, Asma has spent most of her career defending the rights of women, religious minorities, and children of Pakistan. Aided in her mission by fellow activists and colleagues from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, she has continued her battle for justice amidst constant threats to her safety. Her willingness to relentlessly defend victims of rape, women seeking divorce from abusive husbands, people accused of blasphemy, her work on the issues of child labor, and her continuous criticism of political parties has made her one of the most contentious figures in Pakistan. "People aren't willing to believe that these injustices happen in our society," says Asma Jahangir. "But it's all going on next door."

Today, in addition to being an advocate of Supreme Court of Pakistan, Professor of Law at Quaid-e-Azam Law College, Lahore and her work as Chairperson and Honorary Board Member of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Asma Jahangir also serves as a Special Rapporteur of Freedom of Religion or Belief of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. From 1998 – 2004 she also served as a Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Extrajudicial, Arbitrary or Summary Executions, a job that has taken her to Afghanistan, Central America and Colombia. She is also Co-Chair of South Asia for Human Rights since 2000.

Asma Jahangir is recipient of several national awards, including Sitara-i-Imtiaz (Star of Distinction) in 1995. In recognition of her services in the field of human rights, she was awarded the American Bar Association International Human Rights Award in 1992, the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders and the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1995. She was also honoured with the Bernard Simons Memorial Award of the International Bar Association in 2000. She has authored two books: *Divine Sanction? The Hudood Ordinance* (1988) and *Children of a Lesser God: Child Prisoners of Pakistan* (1992). She is a mother of two daughters and a son. Her contributions for the uplift and emancipation of women are extremely commendable and unmatched.