Dr Halima Bashir wins 2010 Anna Politkovskaya Award

The winner of RAW in WAR's fourth annual Anna Politkovskaya Award is Dr. Halima Bashir from Darfur (Sudan).

Halima comes from the Zaghawa tribe who inhabit the western region of Sudan. In 2003 she became her village's first formal doctor at 24. A year later, the conflict in Darfur broke out and Halima ran into trouble with the authorities for telling a reporter that the government should help all Darfuri people regardless of their ethnicity. The Sudanese secret police came for her. They drove her to a "ghost house" - a secret detention centre - and abused her, accusing her of being the doctor that helped the rebels, and that she had spoken to the media. She was told to be silent or face the consequences. As a result, the ministry of health transferred her to a remote village clinic, a punishment posting, in northern Darfur, where she was the only doctor. There in early 2004, Halima personally witnessed grave atrocities against women and girls committed by the Janjaweed. They surrounded a girls' school and held over 40 girls, as young as eight, and their teachers in a primary school, and, while the army stood guard, the militia repeatedly gang-raped the girls.

As she treated the traumatized victims, Halima refused to stay silent once again. She gave detailed witness statements to United Nations representatives, whilst continuing to work in the clinic. Several days later she herself was abducted by Sudanese soldiers, held hostage and gang-raped for three days, to punish her for speaking out and exposing the rape of women and girls by the Janjaweed. They told her they would let her live because "we know you'd prefer to die". After returning to her family, her own village was also attacked and her father killed. Knowing she would no longer be safe in Sudan, she fled the country, and sought asylum in the United Kingdom.

When she was asked by a New York Times writer, Nicholas Kristof, if she regretted speaking out, she remarked, "what happened to me happened to so many other Darfur women. ... I have the chance. I am a well-educated woman, so I can speak up and send a message to the world". Halima was the first to break the silence surrounding Sudanese cultural taboos on sexual violence and became a voice of strength, resilience and courage around the world, speaking out against the rape of women in Darfur committed by the army and the government backed militias. Since leaving Sudan Halima has testified against the current Sudanese president, Omar Al-Bashir, before the International Criminal Court, which indicted him in 2009 for crimes against humanity. Halima has also published an award-winning book, co-written with Journalist Damien Lewis, titled 'Tears of the Desert: A Memoir of Survival in Darfur' (2009). She continues courageously to advocate for justice for the women and girls in Sudan, despite the danger to her own life.