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## WASHINGTON HONORS ADVOCATES FOR GIRLS IN AFGHANISTAN AND WOMEN IN THE CONGO



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Washington, DC: The US-based women's organization [Vital Voices](#) has awarded one of its highest honors to [Sadiqa Basiri Saleem](#), a leading advocate for girl's education in Afghanistan and a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP) since 2004.

Ms Basiri Saleem (photo, right) received the Rising Voices Award March 19 at the [Vital Voices Global Leadership Awards](#), held at the Kennedy Center in Washington. Actress Candice Bergen (photo, left) presented the award in front of an audience of ambassadors and other dignitaries. The event also featured video footage of the former US First Lady Laura Bush praising Ms Basiri Saleem, and an interview with [Shirin Sahani](#), an AP volunteer who worked in Afghanistan with Ms Basiri Saleem in 2006.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who co-founded Vital Voices, spoke after the awards and promised her support. "I pledge I will do what I can to put women's rights on the agenda as a central part of American foreign policy, (and) to champion these issues," she said.

Ms Basiri Saleem was one of five honorees to receive a Vital Voices award, and she took the opportunity to make a powerful appeal for girls' education at a time when the Obama administration is about to step up the military campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

"Only education can transform the world," she said. "This is the way to move my country forward." Ms Basiri Saleem noted that the Koran specifically calls for girls to be educated.

Indeed, she said, the first word revealed in the Koran is "Iqra," which means "read."

Ms Basiri Saleem, who lived as a refugee in Pakistan for 18 years, began her work in 2002 when she started informal classes for 36 girls in an abandoned mosque in her home village of Godah, in Wardak province. Last year, her organization, [The Oruj Learning Center](#), supported the education of 2,870 girls in six schools.

Ms Basiri Saleem is currently finishing an undergraduate degree at Mount Holyoke College and she thanked her father and husband for making it all possible. "This is their award, too," she said.

Two other Vital Voices honorees also have a connection to AP. [Marceline Kongolo-Bice](#), who lost her father and brother to the violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, was honored for her work in starting SOS Femmes en Dangers, a center for women who have suffered from sexual violence. Ms Kongolo-Bice was nominated by AP Peace Fellow [Ned Meerdink](#), who is volunteering with civil society groups in the eastern DRC.

Ms Kongolo-Bice shared the Fern Holland Award (named after an aid worker who was killed in Iraq), with [Chouchou Namegabe Dubuisson](#), another pioneer for women's rights. Ms Dubuisson visited the AP office in Washington before receiving her award. Her organization, the [Association of Women Journalists \(Association des Femmes des Medias, or AFEM\)](#), produces radio programs on sexual violence from the town of Bukavu.

At the awards ceremony, actor Ben Affleck introduced the two Congolese advocates and drew applause when he described the violence as a "wake-up call" to men. "Women are being destroyed," he said. "We men must realize that this is vital to our own survival."

The two women then shocked the audience with their harrowing description of violence and rape in the DRC. Ms Dubuisson said that many assailants pour gasoline and put stones into the vaginas of their victims, who are sometimes forced to eat their own children.

"By honoring me, you honor 2 million women in the Congo," she said. "But breaking the silence is just the beginning. We now need action. Bring criminals to justice. We have to also empower women. To women with stones in the vagina, we need to say 'stop!'"

AP is ready to work with Vital Voices in building on the awards and supporting the programs of Ms Kongolo-Bice and Ms Dubuisson in the DRC. This week, Vital Voices is organizing training for 25 African women advocates in Cape Town, South Africa, with help from Mendi Njonjo, AP's Director of Africa Programs.

- Learn more about the [Oruj Learning Center](#)
- Read about the [Vital Voices honorees](#)