Editorial: We Are Malala

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Frank Franklin II/AP

Malala Yousafzai poses for photographs on Thursday, Oct. 10, 2013, in New York. Yousafzai, was shot by the Taliban for her advocating education for girls. Yousafzai won the $65,000 Sakharov Award, Europe’s top human rights award and is a likely contender for the Nobel Peace Prize.

(AP Photo/Frank Franklin II)

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At age 16, Malala Yousafzai has achieved a level of international stature that 99 percent of us will never know. She didn’t star in a film or record a hit pop song. Malala took a bullet in the face while fighting against Taliban oppression of women and girls in Pakistan.

Her mere survival is phenomenal. The fact that she recovered the ability to walk, talk, speak and write makes her struggle even more noteworthy. But most notable of all is the fact that she refuses to be cowed into silence despite ongoing Taliban death threats.

Malala fights on behalf of women and girls in rural western Asia who face daily challenges from backward men seeking to cage women in houses and cloak them from head to toe in burqas. Their cultural tradition, asserted as devout Islamic belief, assigns women a social position only slightly higher than that of farm animals.

Taliban rule over Afghanistan before the 2001 U.S. invasion was a good example of what this movement does when no one fights back. Girls were banned from going to school. Women were banned from the workplace. They couldn’t walk on the street alone. They could be whipped for showing any skin in public — even an ungloved hand.

Preteen girls continue to be traded into marriage with adult men. A woman whose husband dies becomes the property of the husband’s closest male relative, who can do with her what he pleases.

This should be the subject of international outrage, but most of the world doesn’t know such abuses are occurring. Malala started speaking out at age 11. Her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, shared her sense of outrage and supported
her campaign.

When Taliban threats couldn’t silence her, a man boarded her school bus on Oct. 9, 2012, demanding to know which of the girls on board was Malala. He fired three bullets into her face and neck. *I Am Malala* is the apt title of her new book, written while Malala recovered in Britain.

Last week, the European Parliament awarded her the Andrei Sakharov Prize for defying oppression. Her heroic stand has been celebrated by leaders around the world. On Friday, however, the Nobel Peace Prize went to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

The Nobel recipient is a worthy cause. But a greater good might have been served by awarding it to Malala and helping sustain her fragile campaign’s momentum. Malala’s movement is highly vulnerable to intimidation and can only survive if intense international attention is sustained.

For a teenage girl in a distant corner of the globe to spark life into this movement — against overwhelming odds — is truly extraordinary. The world must not allow Malala’s message to die.