



OP-ED COLUMNIST

# Mother of a Nation

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By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF  
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MEERWALA, Pakistan



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times  
Nicholas D. Kristof.

I don't know whether journalists felt it around the young Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr., but around Mukhtar Mai I sense the presence of greatness.

Mukhtar, who also goes by the name Mukhtaran Bibi, is the young peasant woman — she doesn't know exactly how old she is — who three years ago was gang-raped on order of a local tribal council. Instead of killing herself, as was expected of any self-respecting woman, she prosecuted her attackers, used compensation money to start schools, and started a nationwide revolution to empower women.

Every day, poor and desperate women and girls with tear-smudged cheeks arrive in this remote and impoverished village, seeking sanctuary. Every night, up to a dozen of them sleep on the floor in Mukhtar's bedroom beside her. (She has given her bed to the principal of the girls' elementary school she started here.)

One visitor is a lovely 7-year-old girl who breaks down in huge, heartbreaking sobs as she tells how the servant of a rich family raped her, and how the rich family then threatened to kill her and her family unless she recanted her accusation.

Then there's Fauzia Bibi, a 30-year-old who was raped and tortured by eight men for two days to punish her family because her uncle supposedly had an affair with a woman from their clan. The attackers are threatening to kill her entire family unless she recants.

Inspired by Mukhtar, these women are standing their ground. They are risking their lives — and, in anguish, those of their loved ones — to prosecute their attackers. It's a lesson in courage and civics I'll never forget.

"As long as I'm alive, we'll proceed with this case," said Shabana Mai, the mother of the 7-year-old. "Of course, if they cut my head off, there's nothing I can do."

Mukhtar arranges legal assistance for these women, puts them in touch with aid groups, and looks to their other needs. One woman arrived without a nose; cutting off a nose is a traditional Pakistani way of punishing women. Mukhtar has arranged three surgical operations and, above all, the prosecution of the man who did it.

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Kristof: A Courageous Woman

With her faith in the civilizing power of education, Mukhtar also goes door to door and browbeats parents into sending their daughters to her school. "Sometimes I'll make a deal with the parents — I tell them, 'You send two of your daughters to my school, and I'll let you keep two others at home,' " she explained.

The school goes up to the fourth grade, though next year it will include fifth grade as well. The academic star is Sidra Nazar, a 9-year-old who ranks first in the fourth grade.

But a month ago, Sidra's parents pulled her out of school. Her clan was in a dispute with another, and to resolve the matter she was offered as a bride to a 20-year-old man in the other clan. Outraged, Mukhtar went to Sidra's parents and raised a stink.

Her meddling infuriated Sidra's parents, but they dropped the marriage plans, and Sidra is back in school. "I want to be a doctor," she told me.

I had the honor of addressing the graduation ceremony for Mukhtar's school. (I didn't get an honorary degree, perhaps because Mukhtar thought I would be offended by being made an honorary fourth grader.) But another commencement speaker, a Pakistani human rights activist named Khalid Aftab Sulehri, said it best: he described Mukhtar as "the mother of the nation."

That's what I find so inspiring about this woman. Hers is as sordid a story of evil and victimization as one could find, and yet — by dauntless courage, by the magic of the human spirit — she has transformed it into an uplifting vision of hope.


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My last two columns recounted the story of Aisha Parveen, a young Pakistani who escaped from the brothel in which she had been imprisoned for six years. The courts were threatening to send her back to the brothel owner, who planned to kill her.

In the last few days, everything has changed. The police have dropped all charges against Ms. Parveen, and instead they have arrested the brothel owner on charges of kidnapping her and attempting to murder her. The Pakistani government is now behind Ms. Parveen and giving her 24-hour police protection, and she's thrilled — and thankful for the support from so many readers.

Now for the million other Aisha Parveens around the world. ...

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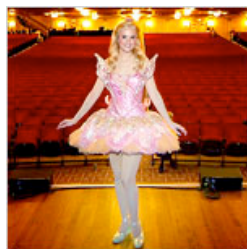
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