

Nicholas D. Kristof: When rapists walk free

Nicholas D. Kristof The New York Times

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NEW YORK One of the gutsiest people on earth is Mukhtaran Bibi. And after this week, she'll need that courage just to survive.

Mukhtaran, a tall, slim young woman who never attended school as a child, lives in a poor, remote village in the Punjab area of Pakistan. As part of a village dispute in 2002, a tribal council decided to punish her family by sentencing her to be gang-raped. She begged and cried, but four of her neighbors immediately carried out the sentence. Then her tormentors made her walk home naked while her father tried to shield her from the eyes of 300 villagers.

Mukhtaran was meant to be so shamed that she would commit suicide. But in a society where women are supposed to be soft and helpless, she proved indescribably tough, and she found the courage to live. She demanded the prosecution of her attackers, and six were sent to death row.

She received \$8,300 in compensation and used it to start two schools in the village, one for boys and one for girls, because she feels that education is the best way to change attitudes like those that led to the attack on her. Illiterate herself, she then enrolled in her own elementary school.

I visited Mukhtaran in her village in September and wrote a column about her. Readers responded with an avalanche of mail, including 1,300 donations for Mukhtaran totaling \$133,000.

The money arrived just in time, for Mukhtaran's schools had run out of funds. She had sold her family's cow to keep them open because she believes so passionately in the redemptive power of education.

Now that cash from readers has put the schools on a sound financial footing again. And Mercy Corps, a first-rate American aid group already active in Pakistan, has agreed to assist Mukhtaran in spending the money wisely. The next step will be to start an ambulance service for the area so sick or injured villagers can get to a hospital.

Down the road, Mukhtaran says, she will try to start her own aid group to battle honor killings. And even though she lives in a remote village without electricity, she has galvanized her supporters to start a Web site: www.mukhtarmai.com. (Although her legal name is Mukhtaran Bibi, she is known in the Pakistani press by a variant, Mukhtar Mai).

Until Thursday, she was thriving. Then - disaster.

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A Pakistani court overturned the death sentences of all six men convicted in the attack on her and ordered five of them freed. They are her neighbors and will be living alongside her. Mukhtaran was in the courthouse and collapsed in tears, fearful of the risk this brings to her family.

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"Yes, there is danger," she said by telephone afterward. "We are afraid for our lives, but we will face whatever fate brings for us."

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Mukhtaran, not the kind of woman to squander money on herself by flying, even when she has access to \$133,000, took a 12-hour bus ride to Islamabad on Friday to appeal to the Supreme Court. Mercy Corps will help keep her in a safe location, and those donations from readers may keep her alive for the time being. But for the long term, Mukhtaran has always said she wants to stay in her village, whatever the risk, because that's where she can make the most difference.

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I had planned to be in Pakistan this week to write a follow-up column about Mukhtaran. But after a month's wait, the Pakistani government has refused to give me a visa, presumably out of fear that I would write more about Pakistani nuclear peddling.

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Mukhtaran's life illuminates what will be the central moral challenge of this century: the brutality that is the lot of so many women and girls in poor countries. For starters, because of inattention to maternal health, a woman dies in childbirth in the developing world every minute.

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In Pakistan, if a woman reports a rape, four Muslim men must generally act as witnesses before she can prove her case. Otherwise, she risks being charged with fornication or adultery - and punished with a public whipping and long imprisonment.

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Mukhtaran is a hero. She suffered what in her society was the most extreme shame imaginable - and emerged as a symbol of virtue. She took a sordid story of perennial poverty, gang rape and judicial brutality and inspires us with her faith in the power of education - and her hope.

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