

Women's rights in Pakistan: The woman who dared to cry rape

When Mukhtar Mai was gang-raped on the orders of village elders to settle a tribal score, she shocked Pakistan by taking her case to the courts. But now she has found herself persecuted once again. Jan McGirk reports from Islamabad.

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It was a scorching afternoon in Islamabad yesterday, when a visibly trembling Mukhtar Mai, teacher and rape victim, announced to assembled journalists that a long-planned trip to America was off because her mother was sick.

No one believed her. Ms Mai was to publicize in the United States the work of the crisis centers she has developed since being brutally gang-raped on the orders of a village court in Meeranwalla, in the Punjab. Now it turned out that, because her mother was ill, she would be unable to undertake a trip that would have been highly embarrassing to the government of Pervez Musharraf.

For the activists who have passionately championed Ms Mai's cause for three long years, the shoddy and hastily arranged "show-conference" was the final insult in a case which has appalled urban Pakistanis, enraged human rights activists around the world and thrown a sharp and unflattering spotlight on the way Pakistan treats its women.

During the first seven months of last year, according to the Independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, at least 151 Pakistani women were gang-raped and 176 were simply murdered as the victims of honor killings. The traumatic case of Mukhtar Mai's experiences, which will not now be personally described to an American audience, has come to stand for all such brutal violations of female dignity in the remote tribal regions of the country.

On a terrible June day three years ago, 14 men from the dominant Mastoi tribe in Meeranwalla volunteered to rape Ms Mai as a way to settle a score after her 12-year-old brother Abdul Shakoor was seen walking with a Mastoi girl. The decision on retribution had been taken by a village court to preserve tribal honour. The jirga, or council of village elders, summoned Ms Mai to apologize for her brother's sexual misdeed. When she apologised, they gang-raped her anyway.

After the atrocity was carried out, Ms Mai was paraded naked before hundreds of onlookers. Finally, her father covered her with a shawl and took her home.

Many assumed that the subsequent rumors that the 30-year-old had committed suicide by swallowing pesticide were true. Few would have blamed her. Calling attention to such

abject abuse is virtually unheard of even in modern-day Pakistan, where the downtrodden, especially women, are expected to remain meek.

But Mukhtar Mai, an unmarried daughter from a low-caste family, was not about to go quietly. She fought back in the courts and at first the legal decisions appeared to go her way. Half a dozen men involved in her rape were punished, with two sentenced to death. But since that early success events have begun to take an increasingly sinister and depressing turn. Last Friday, a court in Lahore refused to extend a 90-day detention order and 12 of the 14 accused were ordered to be released. The case has gone into appeal, and now is expected to go to the Supreme Court.

All the men must do is post a £600 bail each and they can leave jail while the case now goes through a series of appeals. According to a leader in *The News*, an Islamabad English-language daily: "The police failed to provide the prosecution with the damning evidence" even though there were some 150 onlookers who could have testified. "It is introspection time for government," the leader continued.

"It must review the system that routinely acts against people, and sometimes against the government itself... It is ironic that even as her alleged tormentors were freed, the woman who has become a symbol of courage and the rights of Pakistani women was barred from proceeding abroad."

In the village, their homes are right across from Ms Mai's. Every day she must now face the men who gang-raped her and who threaten to do the same again. Naturally Ms Mai was upset and traumatized by last week's decision. But there was also trauma in Islamabad, where the prospect of her imminent visit to the United States was being viewed with trepidation. By last year, Mukhtar Mai had become an international icon for abused women after challenging her rapists and apparently winning. *Time* magazine named her as one of Asia's heroes. Half a dozen of the 14 village men involved were set to hang.

Ms Mai had used her compensation money in the case to start two schools in her village. She even helped to enroll the children of some of her attackers, in order to show that she bore no grudges. American sympathizers sent more than \$133,000 (£73,000) in donations. Using the funds, Ms Mai set up a shelter for abused women and bought a van which is now used as an ambulance in the area. She had become something of a local heroine, and on the back of such a triumphant and defiant rehabilitation, she had decided to go to the US to publicize her schools and voluntary efforts. In Islamabad, senior politicians shuddered at the prospect.

The thought of Ms Mai receiving applause in auditoriums across America prompted immediate and savage action. In effect, the government decided that Ms Mai needed to be gagged. The American visit was scheduled to begin last Saturday. On Thursday, the authorities placed Ms Mai under house arrest. She has reportedly said that when she attempted to leave her home, police pointed their guns at her. Three women police officers traipsed after her from room to room, even following her into the toilet. After

overhearing a couple of telephone interviews with journalists, police severed her landline. Ms Mai's name remains on a blacklist, normally reserved to curtail the movement of political extremists, called the Exit Control List.

While Ms Mai was under house arrest on Friday, the court decided to release her attackers. Lahore courts do not normally operate on Fridays. Their re-opening appeared to be a clear and calculated attempt to change the balance of power in the Mai case. Using her mobile phone, Ms Mai continued to argue her case. To no avail. Airports were alerted that Ms Mai should not be permitted to leave the country.

There was an international outcry. The actual request to keep Ms Mai in the country allegedly came from the Pakistani ambassador in Washington, Jahangir Karamat. In the end, Ms Mai never made it out of her village, much less to the airport.

Weeping yesterday afternoon, Ms Mai told a founder of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Asma Jahangir, that she was rushed on Monday night to the capital and made to sign papers requesting the return of her passport from the American embassy visa office. Her signed statement maintains that she had not been under detention in her home village, but guarded for her own protection.

Then Ms Mai called yesterday's press conference – held at the women's development ministry in Islamabad – to announce that her speaking engagements in America were cancelled.

"I came to Islamabad to discuss my crisis centre back in the village," she said. "I decided of my own free will not to go abroad, because my mother is ill." Minutes later, Farzana Bari, a women's rights activist, rang her mother in the village and said she sounded perfectly fine. "But Mukhtar looks completely terrorized," she added. "The government was afraid she would tarnish its image." Insiders say she is frightened that government agencies will "whisk her away" if she dares speak out again. Activists claim that Ms Mai relented to pressure after being told that President Musharraf was personally "very angry" with her.

The case has indeed embarrassed President Musharraf, a "modern" general who is keen to play down the religious extremism in backward parts of his country. He has been promoting "an enlightened Islam" but activists say that this vision seems to exclude women. Privately, General Musharraf is enraged at how Ms Mai's case has brought infamy to Pakistan. Instead of promoting justice in the case, his reaction, along with a group of newspaper editors, has been to suppress information about the case. The President even threatened to "slap" a reporter "in the face" for publishing details in an international magazine about Ms Mai's defiance. The reporter in question was Pakistan's leading women's rights activist, Ms Jehangir, who is also a UN special rapporteur on human rights.

General Musharraf incurred the wrath of women's rights activists earlier this year. A tribe in Baluchistan began a revolt after an army captain allegedly raped a woman doctor

working for the state-run gas company at its desert installations. The tribal chieftain, Nawab Bugti insisted that the suspected rapist be tried by tribal custom - walking across burning coals to prove his innocence.

Instead, the suspected rapist, who had powerful family connections within the military, has so far never been tried. Nor is he likely to ever face justice, after General Musharraf publicly declared he thought that the captain was innocent. The woman doctor was encouraged by the authorities to leave the country - not a choice for the defiant village schoolteacher.

The ruling party has vilified Ms Mai's supporters as unpatriotic. The State Interior Minister, Shahzad Wasim, said: "People in NGOs are ready to say anything for one dinner with Johnny Walker and eat innocent people like vultures."

Above all, yesterday's extraordinary press conference appears to demonstrate that Pakistan is willing to go to enormous and unjust lengths to protect its public image. Officials are desperate to hush up the brutal justice of the tribal hinterlands in Punjab as a matter of public relations. Medieval punishment discourages investment in the infrastructure, and Pakistan is eager to be perceived as a haven for moderate Muslims. Mukhtar Mai could never have been allowed to go to America and tell her terrible story.

When Time magazine nominated Ms Mai as one of Asia's heroes, it commented: "As long as the state refuses to fully challenge the brutality of tribal law, the plight of Pakistani women will continue. Mukhtar Mai is a symbol of their victimhood, but in her resilience she is also a symbol of their strength."