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Sentenced to Be Raped

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[MEERWALA, Pakistan] – I’m still trying to help out President Bush by tracking down Osama bin Laden. After poking through remote parts of Pakistan, asking for a tall Arab with a beard, I can’t say I’ve earned that \$25 million reward.

But I did come across someone even more extraordinary than Osama.

Usually we journalists write about rogues, but Mukhtaran Bibi could not be more altruistic or brave, as the men who gang-raped her discovered. I firmly believe that the central moral challenge of this century, equivalent to the struggles against slavery in the 19th century or against totalitarianism in the 20th, will be to address sex inequality in the third world – and it’s the stories of women like Ms. Mukhtaran that convince me this is so.

The plight of women in developing countries isn’t addressed much in the West, and it certainly isn’t a hot topic in the presidential campaign. But it’s a life-and-death matter in villages like Meerwala, a 12-hour drive southeast from Islamabad.

In June 2002, the police say, members of a high-status tribe sexually abused one of Ms. Mukhtaran’s brothers and then covered up their crime by falsely accusing him of having an affair with a high-status woman. The village’s tribal council determined that the suitable punishment for the supposed affair was for high-status men to rape one of the boy’s sisters, so the council sentenced Ms. Mukhtaran to be gang-raped.

As members of the high-status tribe danced in joy, four men stripped her naked and took turns raping her. Then they forced her to walk home naked in front of 300 villagers.

In Pakistan’s conservative Muslim society, Ms. Mukhtaran’s duty was now clear: she was supposed to commit suicide. “Just like other women, I initially thought of killing myself,” said Ms. Mukhtaran, now 30. Her older brother, Hezoor Bux, explained: “A girl who has been raped has no honorable place in the village. Nobody respects the girl, or her parents. There’s a stigma, and the only way out is suicide.”

A girl in the next village was gang-raped a week after Ms. Mukhtaran, and she took the traditional route: she swallowed a bottle of pesticide and dropped dead.

But instead of killing herself, Ms. Mukhtaran testified against her attackers and propounded the shocking idea that the shame lies in raping, rather than in being raped. The rapists are now on death row, and President Pervez Musharraf presented Ms. Mukhtaran with the equivalent of \$8,300 and ordered round-the-clock police protection for her.

Ms. Mukhtaran, who had never gone to school herself, used the money to build one school in the village for girls and another for boys – because, she said, education is the best way to achieve social change. The girls’ school is named for her, and she is now studying in its fourth-grade class.

“Why should I have spent the money on myself?” she asked, adding, “This way the money is helping all the girls, all the children.”

I wish the story ended there. But the Pakistani government has neglected its pledge to pay the schools’ operating expenses. “The government made lots of promises, but it hasn’t done much,” Ms. Mukhtaran said bluntly.

She has had to buy food for the police who protect her, as well as pay some school expenses. So, she said, “I’ve run out of money.” Unless the schools can raise new funds, they may have to close.

Meanwhile, villagers say that relatives of the rapists are waiting for the police to leave and then will put Ms. Mukhtaran in her place by slaughtering her and her entire family. I walked to the area where the high-status tribesmen live. They denied planning to kill Ms. Mukhtaran, but were unapologetic about her rape.

“Mukhtaran is totally disgraced,” Taj Bibi, a matriarch in a high-status family, said with satisfaction. “She has no respect in society.”

So although I did not find Osama, I did encounter a much more ubiquitous form of evil and terror: a culture, stretching across about half the globe, that chews up women and spits them out.

We in the West could help chip away at that oppression, with health and literacy programs and by simply speaking out against it, just as we once stood up against slavery and totalitarianism. But instead of standing beside fighters like Ms. Mukhtaran, we’re still sitting on the fence.

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