



dozen years ago, it would have been absurd to think that a young female social worker, small in stature and with a club foot, could have any impact on the mobs that run the brothels in Hyderabad. Aid groups were too sensible to tackle the problem. Yet Sumitha brazenly marched into the red-light districts and started her own organization, in a way emblematic of social entrepreneurs. They can be difficult, seemingly unreasonable people, but these very qualities are sometimes precisely what allow them to succeed.

On her own, Sumitha would have lacked the resources to wage her campaigns against the brothels, but American donors have supported her and multiplied her impact. Catholic Relief Services in particular has been a stalwart supporter of Sumitha and the Prajwala programs. The networks and introductions that Bill Drayton made for her, as an Ashoka Fellow, also magnified her voice. It's a prototype of the kind of alliance between first world and third that the abolitionist movement needs.

*Abbas now works in this shelter and is trying to find a man who is HIV positive, as she is, to marry.*  
(Nicholas D. Kristof)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Rule by Rape

The mechanism of violence is what destroys women, controls women, diminishes women and keeps women in their so-called place.

— EVE ENSLER, *A Memory, a Monologue, a Rant, and a Prayer*

Rape has become endemic in South Africa, so a medical technician named Sonette Ehlers developed a product that immediately grabbed national attention there. Ehlers had never forgotten a rape victim telling her forlornly: “If only I had teeth down there.” Some time afterward, a man came into the hospital where Ehlers works in excruciating pain because his penis was stuck in his pants zipper. Ehlers merged those images and came up with a product she called Rapex. It resembles a tube, with barbs inside. The woman inserts it like a tampon, with an applicator, and any man who tries to rape the woman impales himself on the barbs and must go to an emergency room to have the Rapex removed. When critics complained that it was a medieval punishment, Ehlers responded tersely: “A medieval device for a medieval deed.”

The Rapex is a reflection of the gender-based violence that is ubiquitous in much of the developing world, inflicting far more casualties than any war. Surveys suggest that about one third of all women worldwide face beatings in the home. Women aged fifteen through forty-four are more likely to be maimed or die from male violence than from cancer, malaria, traffic accidents, and war combined. A major study by the World Health Organization found that in most countries, between 30 percent and 60 percent of women had experienced physical or sexual violence by a husband or boyfriend. “Violence against women by an intimate partner is a major contributor to the ill health of women,” said the former director-general of WHO, Lee Jong-wook.

Rape is so stigmatizing that many women do not report it, and thus

researchers have difficulty tabulating accurate figures. Yet some evidence suggests that it is very widespread: 21 percent of Ghanaian women reported in one survey that their sexual initiation was by rape; 17 percent of Nigerian women said that they had endured rape or attempted rape by the age of nineteen; and 21 percent of South African women reported that they had been raped by the age of fifteen.

Violence against women is also constantly mutating into new forms. The first documented acid attack occurred in 1967, in what is now Bangladesh. Now it is increasingly common for men in South Asia or Southeast Asia to take sulfuric acid and hurl it in the faces of girls or women who have spurned them. The acid melts the skin and sometimes the bones underneath; if it strikes the eyes, the woman is blinded. In the world of misogyny, that is technological innovation.

Such violence often functions to keep women down. One impediment for women planning to run for political office in Kenya is the cost of round-the-clock security. That protection is needed to prevent political enemies from having them raped; gangsters calculate that female candidates can be uniquely humiliated and discredited that way. The result is that Kenyan women candidates routinely carry knives and wear multiple sets of tights to deter, complicate, and delay any attempted rape.

In many poor countries, the problem is not so much individual thugs and rapists but an entire culture of sexual predation. That's the world of Woinshet Zebene.

Woinshet, a light-skinned black girl in Ethiopia, keeps her long hair brushed back, letting it frame a face that is almost always serious, determined, studious. She grew up in a rural area where kidnapping and raping girls is a time-honored tradition. In the Ethiopian countryside, if a young man has an eye on a girl but doesn't have a bride price (the equivalent of a dowry, but paid by the man), or if he doubts that the girl's family will accept him, then he and several friends kidnap the girl, and he rapes her. That immediately improves his bargaining position, because she is ruined and will have difficulty marrying anyone else. The risks to the boy are minimal, since the girl's parents never prosecute the rapist—that would aggravate the harm to their daughter's reputation and would be resented in the community as a breach of tradition. Indeed, at the time of Woinshet's rape, Ethiopian law explicitly provided that a man could not be prosecuted for violating a woman or girl he later married.



Woinshet with her father, Zebene, in Addis Ababa (Nicholas D. Kristof)

"There were many cases like this in our village," said Woinshet's father, Zebene, who left years ago to work as a peddler in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, returning regularly to visit his family. "I knew it was very bad for the girl, but there was nothing to do. They all married the man. . . . When he goes free, people see that, and they do it again and again."

Woinshet and her father were sitting in his shack, trying to explain what had happened. The shack is on the edge of Addis Ababa, and the traffic noise from beeping cars and buses without mufflers provided a steady background clamor. Neighbors were on all sides, separated by thin walls, and Woinshet and her father spoke in low voices so no one would hear of the girl's rape. Woinshet was reserved, looking at her hands and, occasionally at her father as he attempted to explain that the villagers are not bad people. "Stealing is a very shameful act in the villages," he said. "If someone steals a goat, the people would beat him up."

But kidnapping a girl is okay?

"More weight is still given to the crime of stealing a thing than to the crime of stealing a person," Zebene said sadly. He looked over at Woinshet and added, "I never thought this would happen to my family."

Then Woinshet took over the story. Continuing to look mostly downward, she sat in the dim hut and with quiet dignity told what had happened when she was still living in the village, as a thirteen-year-old seventh grader.

"We were deep asleep when they came," she said calmly. "Maybe it

was eleven thirty at night. I think there were more than four of them. There was no electricity, but they had a flashlight with them. They broke down the door and took me. We were shouting, but nobody heard us. Or at least nobody came."

Woinshet didn't know her kidnapper, Aberew Jemma, and had never spoken to him, but Aberew had noticed her. For two days the kidnappers casually battered and raped Woinshet. Her family and a teacher went to the police and demanded that they rescue her. As the police approached, Woinshet escaped—hurtling down the village path, screaming, covered in blood and bruises.

Zebene returned to the village from the capital as soon as he heard of his daughter's kidnapping, and he was not inclined to have his loving, studious daughter marry the man who had raped her. In Addis Ababa, he had often heard radio commercials about women's rights aired by the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association. He had seen women in the capital working confidently, holding meaningful jobs, enjoying rights and a measure of equality. So Zebene talked to Woinshet, and they decided that she would refuse to marry Aberew. Both Zebene and Woinshet are quiet and unassuming but possess steel spines; both are disinclined to back down. They were appalled by what had happened and refused to be mollified as tradition demanded. They decided that Woinshet would report the rape as a crime.

She walked five miles to the nearest bus stop, waited two days for a bus, then endured the grueling journey to a town with a health center. There she underwent a pelvic exam by a nurse, who wrote in her health record: "She is no longer a virgin. . . . Many bruises and scratches."

When Woinshet returned to the village, the elders encouraged her family to settle the dispute with Aberew. Seeking to avoid a blood feud, they repeatedly pressured Zebene to accept a couple of cows for allowing Woinshet to marry Aberew. Zebene refused to even discuss such a transaction. As the stalemate persisted, Aberew and his family became increasingly concerned that they might be prosecuted, so they devised a solution: Aberew kidnapped Woinshet again, took her far away, and then resumed the beatings and rapes, demanding that she consent to marriage.

Woinshet managed to escape, but she was recaptured during what was for her a three-day hike back home. Remarkably, Aberew even took her to the local court after kidnapping her, so that she could be

bullied into telling court officials that she wanted to marry him. Instead, Woinshet—a battered, pint-sized girl surrounded by men who were threatening her—told the court official that she had been abducted, and she pleaded to be allowed to go home. The official, a man, didn't want to listen to a girl and told Woinshet to get it over with and marry Aberew.

"Even if you go home, Aberew will go after you again," the official told her. "So there's no point in resisting."

Woinshet was determined not to marry anyone yet, let alone her kidnapper. "I wanted to stay in school," she recalled, speaking softly but with utter determination. Aberew was keeping her inside a house in a walled compound, but one time she was able to scale the wall and flee. Everyone saw her and heard her scream, yet no one helped.

"People were saying I broke tradition," Woinshet said bitterly, and she looked up from her hands for a moment. "They were criticizing me, saying I had escaped. I was furious with that attitude." In the hope of staying alive, Woinshet moved to the police station and was housed in a jail cell—so the rape victim was in a cell and the rapist was free. The police belatedly gathered evidence, including the broken door to Woinshet's home and her torn and bloody clothing. They also collected statements from witnesses, who included a great many people in the village. But the judges to whom the case was presented thought that prosecution of Aberew was a mistake. At a court hearing, the judge told Woinshet: "He wants to marry you. Why are you refusing?"

Finally, the judge sentenced Aberew to ten years in prison. But a month later, for reasons that are unclear, the judge released him. Woinshet fled to Addis Ababa, where she moved into her father's shack and resumed her studies.

"I decided to leave and go someplace where no one would recognize me," she said. Then she added slowly and firmly: "I will never marry anyone. I don't want to deal with any man."

Such a culture in rural Ethiopia might seem impervious to change. But Woinshet found support in an unlikely corner: indignant Americans, mostly women, who wrote angry letters demanding change in the Ethiopian legal code. They couldn't undo the trauma Woinshet suffered, but the moral support was important to her and her father—reassurance when virtually everyone around them condemned the family for breaching tradition. Americans also provided financial sup-

port and a stipend to help Woinshet pursue her education in Addis Ababa.

The letter writers were mobilized by Equality Now, an advocacy organization based in New York that tackles abuses of women around the world. Its founder, Jessica Neuwirth, had worked at Amnesty International and had seen how letter-writing campaigns could help free political prisoners. So in 1992, she founded Equality Now. It has been an uphill struggle to get enough donations to sustain the effort, but Jessica has kept Equality Now going with the support of guardian angels, including Gloria Steinem and Meryl Streep. Today it has a staff of fifteen in New York, London, and Nairobi, with an annual budget of \$2 million—pocket change in the world of philanthropy.

Equality Now launched appeals on behalf of Woinshet, but it seems unlikely that Aberew will go to prison again. However, Equality Now's army of letter writers did shine enough of a spotlight on Ethiopia that it was shamed into changing its laws. Today, a man is liable for rape even if the victim later agrees to marry him.

Of course, that's only the law, and in poor countries laws rarely matter much outside the capital. We sometimes think that Westerners invest too much effort in changing unjust laws and not enough in changing culture, by building schools or assisting grassroots movements. Even in the United States, after all, what brought equal rights to blacks wasn't the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments passed after the Civil War, but rather the grassroots civil rights movement nearly one hundred years later. Laws matter, but typically changing the law by itself accomplishes little. Mahdere Paulos, the dynamic woman who runs the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, agrees. The association does much of its work by filing suits or otherwise lobbying to change laws, but Mahdere acknowledges that change has to be felt in the culture as well as the legal code.

"Empowering women begins with education," she said. She sees the cadre of educated women growing. Some twelve thousand women a year now volunteer with the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, giving it political as well as legal weight. Equality Now works closely with the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, and that is a useful model: We in the West can best help by playing supporting roles to local people. And the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association may soon have another volunteer. Woinshet is now in high school, getting good grades and planning to go to university and study law.

"I would like, God willing, to take on cases of abduction," she said simply. "If I can't get justice for myself, I'll get justice for others."

**B**ehind the rapes and other abuse heaped on women in much of the world, it's hard not to see something more sinister than just libido and prurient opportunism. Namely: sexism and misogyny.

How else to explain why so many more witches were burned than wizards? Why is acid thrown in women's faces, but not in men's? Why are women so much more likely to be stripped naked and sexually humiliated than men? Why is it that in many cultures, old men are respected as patriarchs, while old women are taken outside the village to die of thirst or to be eaten by wild animals? Granted, in the societies where these abuses take place, men also suffer more violence than males do in America—but the brutality inflicted on women is particularly widespread, cruel, and lethal.

These attitudes are embedded in culture and will change only with education and local leadership. But outsiders have their supporting role to play, too, in part by shining a spotlight on these regressive attitudes in an effort to break the taboo that often surrounds them. In 2007, senators Joseph Biden and Richard Lugar first introduced the International Violence Against Women Act, which will be reintroduced annually until it becomes law. The bill provides for \$175 million a year in foreign aid to try to prevent honor killings, bride burnings, genital cutting, acid attacks, mass rapes, and domestic violence. The bill would also create an Office of Women's Global Initiatives in the immediate office of the secretary of state, and a Women's Global Development Office in the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Both offices would press to make gender-based violence a diplomatic priority. For all our skepticism about laws, this one, like the landmark 2000 legislation that required annual reports about human trafficking abroad, would have a real if incremental impact around the world. It won't solve any problem completely, but it could make a difference to girls like Woinshet.

In talking about misogyny and gender-based violence, it would be easy to slip into the conceit that men are the villains. But it's not true. Granted, men are often brutal to women. Yet it is women who routinely manage brothels in poor countries, who ensure that their daughters' genitals are cut, who feed sons before daughters, who take their sons but not their daughters to clinics for vaccination. One study sug-

gests that women perpetrators were involved, along with men, in one quarter of the gang rapes in the Sierra Leone civil war. Typically, women fighters would lure a victim to the rape site, and then restrain her as she was raped by male fighters. "We would help capture her and hold her down," one woman ex-combatant explained. The author of the study, Dara Kay Cohen, cites evidence from Haiti, Iraq, and Rwanda to suggest that female participation in Sierra Leone's sexual violence was not an anomaly. She argues that ubiquitous gang rape in civil wars isn't about sexual gratification, but rather is a way for military units—including their female members—to bond, by engaging in sometimes brutally misogynistic violence.

Female infanticide persists in many countries, and often it is mothers who kill their own daughters. Dr. Michael H. Stone, a professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University and expert on infanticide, obtained data on Pakistani women who killed their daughters. He found that they usually did so because their husbands threatened to divorce them if they kept the girl. For example, a woman named Shahnaz poisoned her daughter to avoid being divorced by her husband. Perveen poisoned her daughter after her father-in-law beat her for giving birth to a girl. Yet sometimes women in Pakistan or China kill their newborn daughters simply because daughters are less prestigious than sons. Rehana drowned her daughter because "girls are unlucky."

As for wife beating, one survey found support for it from 62 percent of Indian village women themselves. And no group systematically abuses young women more cruelly than mothers-in-law, who serve as household matriarchs in much of the world and take charge of disciplining the younger women. The experience of Zoya Najabi, a twenty-one-year-old woman from a middle-class family in Kabul, Afghanistan, illustrates the point. She came to our interview wearing blue jeans with embroidered flowers and looked more like an American than an Afghan. She went to school up to the eighth grade, but then, after her marriage at age twelve to a sixteen-year-old boy, she was subjected to constant corporal punishment.

"Not only my husband, but his brother, his mother, and his sister—they all beat me," Zoya recalled indignantly, speaking at a shelter in Kabul. Even worse, they would punish her for faulty housework by tying her to a bucket and dunking her in the well, leaving her freezing, gasping, and half drowned. The worst moment came when Zoya's mother-in-law was beating her and Zoya unthinkingly kicked back.



**Z**oya Najabi  
in a shelter in  
Afghanistan, after  
fleeing her husband's  
family (Nicholas D.  
Krisof)

Resisting a mother-in-law is an outrageous sin. First, Zoya's husband dug out an electrical cable and flogged his wife until she fell unconscious. Then, the next day, her father-in-law strapped Zoya's feet together, tied her down, and gave a stick to the mother-in-law, who whipped the soles of Zoya's feet.

"My feet were beaten until they were like yogurt," Zoya said. "All my days there were unhappy, but that was the worst."

"Mostly those kinds of beatings happen because the husbands are illiterate and uneducated," she added. "But it also happens that the wife is not taking care of her husband or is not obedient. Then it is appropriate to beat the wife."

Zoya smiled a bit when she saw the shock on our faces. She explained patiently: "I should not have been beaten, because I was always obedient and did what my husband said. But if the wife is truly disobedient, then of course her husband has to beat her."

In short, women themselves absorb and transmit misogynistic values, just as men do. This is not a tidy world of tyrannical men and victimized women, but a messier realm of oppressive social customs adhered to by men and women alike. As we said, laws can help, but the greatest challenge is to change these ways of thinking. And perhaps the very best means of combating suffocating traditions is education—through schools like one of our favorites, in a remote nook of the Pakistani Punjab, run by one of the world's most extraordinary women.

## Mukhtar's School

The most effective change agents aren't foreigners but local women (and sometimes men) who galvanize a movement—women like Mukhtar Mai.

Mukhtar grew up in a peasant family in the village of Meerwala in southern Punjab. When people ask her age, she tosses out one number or another, but the truth is that she doesn't have a clue as to when she was born. Mukhtar never attended school, because there was no school for girls in Meerwala, and she spent her days helping out around the house.

Then, in July 2002, her younger brother, Shakur, was kidnapped and gang-raped by members of a higher-status clan, the Mastoi. (In Pakistan, rapes of boys by heterosexual men are not uncommon and are less stigmatized than the rapes of girls.) Shakur was twelve or thirteen at the time, and after raping him the Mastoi became nervous that they might be punished. So they refused to release Shakur and covered up their crime by accusing him of having had sex with a Mastoi girl, Salma. Because the Mastoi had accused Shakur of illicit sex, the village tribal assembly, dominated by the Mastoi, held a meeting. Mukhtar attended on behalf of her family to apologize and try to soothe feelings. A crowd gathered around Mukhtar, including several Mastoi men armed with guns, and the tribal council concluded that an apology from Mukhtar would not be enough. To punish Shakur and his family, the council sentenced Mukhtar to be gang-raped. Four men dragged her, screaming and pleading, into an empty stable next to the meeting area and, as the crowd waited outside, they stripped her and raped her on the dirt floor, one after the other.

"They know that a woman humiliated in that way has no other recourse except suicide," Mukhtar wrote later. "They don't even need to use their weapons. Rape kills her."

After administering the sentence, the rapists pushed Mukhtar out of the stable and forced her to stagger home, almost naked, before a jeering crowd. Once home, she prepared to do what any Pakistani peasant woman would normally do in that situation: kill herself. Suicide is the expected way for a woman to cleanse herself and her family of the



*Mukhtar Mai when we first met her, with students at her school. (Nicholas D. Kristof)*

shame. But Mukhtar's mother and father kept watch over her and prevented that option; then a local Muslim leader—one of the heroes in this story—spoke up for her at Friday prayers and denounced the rape as an outrage against Islam.

As the days passed, Mukhtar's attitude mutated from humiliation to rage. Finally, she did something revolutionary. She went to the police and reported the rape, demanding prosecution. The police, somewhat surprisingly, then arrested the attackers. President Pervez Musharraf heard about the case and sympathized, sending Mukhtar the equivalent of \$8,300 in compensation. But instead of taking the money for herself, Mukhtar decided to invest it in what her village needed most—schools.

"Why should I have spent the money on myself?" she told Nick on his first visit to Meerwala. "This way the money is helping all the girls, all the children." During that first visit, Mukhtar was hard to get to know. When her father greeted Nick and invited him into the house, it took Nick a while to figure out who Mukhtar was. Mukhtar's father and brothers did all the talking, and Mukhtar was simply one of several women who listened in the back. She covered her face with a scarf, and all he could see were her eyes, burning with intensity. Time after time, when Nick would ask Mukhtar a question, her older brother would answer.

"So, Mukhtar, why did you use your money to start a school?"

"She started a school because she believes in education."

After a couple of hours, the novelty of having an American in the

house wore off, and the men became fidgety and wandered off to do errands. Finally, Mukhtar herself began to speak, her voice muffled by the scarf. She spoke passionately of her belief in the redemptive quality of education, in her hope that men and women in the villages could live together in harmony if only they had an education. The best way to overcome the attitudes that led to her rape, she said, was to spread education.

The police were stationed in Mukhtar's home, nominally to protect her, and they listened to the entire interview. Afterward, Mukhtar steered Nick aside to plead for help. "The police are just stealing from my family," she said angrily. "They're not helping us. And the government has forgotten about me. It made promises to help my school, but it does nothing." The new Mukhtar Mai School for Girls stood next to her house, and Mukhtar had enrolled in her own school, sitting beside the littlest girls and learning to read and write with them. But the school was unfinished and running out of operating funds.

Nick's columns about Mukhtar (who at the time went by a variant of her name, Mukhtaran Bibi) brought her \$430,000 in contributions from readers, channeled through Mercy Corps, an aid group that does work in Pakistan. But it also brought harassment from the government. President Musharraf initially admired Mukhtar's courage, but he wanted Pakistan to be renowned for a sizzling economy, not notorious for barbaric rapes. Mukhtar's public comments—including her insistence that rape of poor women was a systemic problem—embarrassed him. So the intelligence services began to lean on Mukhtar to keep quiet. She refused to do so, and the government fired a warning shot: Officials ordered the release of the men who had been convicted of raping her. Mukhtar collapsed in tears.

"I'm afraid for my life," she told us by phone that night. Still, she wouldn't back down, and her response was to call on the Pakistani government to pay more attention to women's rights. Mukhtar went ahead with plans to visit the United States and speak at a conference on women. So President Musharraf, by his own account, put her on the "exit control list," a blacklist of Pakistanis barred from leaving the country. Mukhtar denounced the Pakistani government for doing so and refused to be intimidated. So then the intelligence services put her under house arrest and cut off her telephone land line. But she could still go up on her roof and get a weak cell phone connection, so she used it to describe to us how the police who supposedly were protecting her were now pointing their guns at her.

Enraged at Mukhtar's continued defiance and outspokenness, Musharraf ordered her kidnapped (or, as he euphemistically put it, brought to the capital). Intelligence agents busted Mukhtar into a car and a convoy drove her to Islamabad, where she was furiously berated.

"You have betrayed your country and helped our enemies!" an official told her. "You have shamed Pakistan before the world." Then the intelligence officers led Mukhtar, sobbing bitterly, off to a safe house, where she was prevented from contacting anyone. As all this was transpiring, Pakistan's foreign minister was visiting the White House and hearing President George W. Bush publicly praise Musharraf's "bold leadership."

Publicity about Pakistan's harassment of Mukhtar was embarrassing to the Bush administration, so Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called the Pakistani foreign minister and told him it had to stop. The authorities released Mukhtar. Musharraf's aides proposed that, when the tempest died down, Pakistani officials accompany Mukhtar on a tightly chaperoned visit to the United States, where she would emphasize what a fine job the Pakistani government was doing. Mukhtar refused. "I only want to go of my own free will," she said. Mukhtar also complained publicly that her passport had been seized. Soon Musharraf returned the passport and allowed her to visit the United States on her own.

By now, Musharraf had turned Mukhtar into a celebrity. She was invited to the White House and the State Department, and the French foreign minister discussed international affairs with her. *Glamour* magazine flew Mukhtar first class to New York to honor her as a "woman of the year" at a banquet where she was introduced by someone she had never heard of—Brooke Shields. Laura Bush offered a video tribute, noting, "Please don't assume that it's only a tale of heartbreak. Mukhtar proves that one woman really can change the world."

On that visit, Mukhtar sat in her palatial hotel suite on Central Park West, dizzied by the attention and luxury and deeply homesick for Meerwala. She worried about what would happen to the girls in her school during her absence. She found the interviews tiresome, partly because reporters weren't interested in her school but only in the rape. That's all they asked: *So what was it like being gang-raped?* Mukhtar had a disastrous live interview on the CBS morning news in which she was asked about it. Mukhtar indignantly replied: *I don't really want to talk about that. . . .* There was an awkward silence.

During her American visit, Mukhtar was repeatedly invited by important people to dine in fancy restaurants; she kept asking for Pakistani takeout. Officials would tell Mukhtar how active their governments or aid groups were in Pakistan, and she would ask: "Where in Pakistan do you operate?" And the answer would come: Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore. Mukhtar would shake her head and say, "Where we need help is the countryside. Please, go to the villages and do your work there."

Mukhtar herself lived by that credo. Sympathetic aid workers constantly urged her to move to Islamabad, where she could be safe. But she refused to discuss it. "My work is in my village," she said when we brought it up. "That is where the needs are. I am afraid, but I will meet my fate. It is in God's hands."

Visitors to events where Mukhtar was honored saw a shy woman with a head scarf getting one standing ovation after another (when she appeared in *Glamour*; she set the magazine's all-time record for clothing-to-skin ratio). But Mukhtar's passion was always her school and her village, and most of her work was not at all glamorous.

Nick has twice been a commencement speaker at Mukhtar's school, and the ceremony is quite a sight. More than one thousand students, parents, and relatives gather in a huge tent erected in a field, and they watch the students sing and perform skits warning against wife beating or early marriage. The mood is festive, and even some of the children of Mukhtar's imprisoned rapists take part. The girls incongruously break into spasms of laughter when pretending to be beaten by their husbands. Yet the constant message is for parents to keep girls in school, and that is an obsession for Mukhtar.

She was particularly determined to save one of her fourth-grade students, Halima Amir, from being pulled out of school to be married. Halima was twelve, tall and thin with long black hair, and she had been engaged at age seven to a boy five years older.

"I saw him once," Halima said of her fiancé, As-Salam. "I never talked to him. I wouldn't recognize him if I saw him again. I don't want to get married now." Halima had been first in her class the previous year, and her favorite subject was English. Her fiancé was illiterate. But her parents worried that she would soon hit puberty, and they wanted her to be married off before she might develop a crush on someone else and start people gossiping—or damage her most valuable possession of all, her hymen. Time and again, Mukhtar went to

Halima's home, pleading with her parents to keep her in school. The drama was unfolding during one of Nick's visits to the school, and so on his next trip he asked about Halima.

"She's not here anymore," another student explained. "Her parents arranged a marriage for her. They waited until Mukhtar was away on a trip, and then they pulled Halima out of school and married her off. Now she's living a long way away." Not every battle ends in victory.

With the help of the contributions people sent her, Mukhtar expanded her activities. She built a girls' high school and began operating a school for boys as well. She obtained a herd of dairy cows to provide income to sustain the schools. She bought a school van that doubles as an ambulance, to take pregnant women to a hospital when they are ready to deliver. She built another school in a nearby gangster-ridden area, where even the government didn't dare operate—and the gangsters, rather than rob the school, enrolled their own children in it. She persuaded the province to build a women's college to absorb her high school's graduates.

Mukhtar welcomes volunteers to teach English in her schools and will give them free room and board as long as they commit to staying a few months. We can't imagine a richer learning experience.

Mukhtar also started her own aid group, the Mukhtar Mai Women's Welfare Organization, which operates a twenty-four-hour hotline for battered women, a free legal clinic, a public library, and a shelter for victims of violence. That was necessary because as Mukhtar's fame spread—partly through a weekly television show she launched—women from around the country started showing up at her home. They arrived by bus, foot, taxi, or rickshaw—and often they didn't even have money to pay the driver. The rickshaw drivers came to realize that if they showed up at Mukhtar's home with a sobbing woman, Mukhtar would pay the fare. Then Mukhtar used her prominence to nudge police, journalists, and lawyers to help the victims. Mukhtar didn't speak with sophistication or learning, but she was relentless and effective. And when women came to her with their faces destroyed by acid attacks or with their noses chopped off—a traditional punishment for "bad" or "loose" women—Mukhtar arranged plastic surgery.

Mukhtar herself changed with time. She learned Urdu and became fluent. When we first visited Meerwala, she asked permission from her father or older brother every time she left the house. That became less tenable when she was hosting ambassadors, so she began going out



without permission. This offended her older brother (her father and younger brother admire her too much to be bothered) and put a strain on the family. At one point, her older brother threatened to kill her unless she was more obedient. It didn't help that the forlorn women who were arriving at Mukhtar's doorstep were devouring the family's food and monopolizing the outhouse. But her older brother mellowed, for he is also moved by the stories of the visitors; a bit grudgingly, he admits that his sister is doing extraordinary work, and that times are changing.

Mukhtar always used to cover her face and hair entirely, with just her eyes peeking through a slit. At the banquets where she was being honored in the United States, men had to be warned not to try to shake hands with her, to hug her, or—most scandalous—to peck her on the cheek. Yet after a year or so, Mukhtar became less finicky about her head scarf and began to shake hands with men. Her faith is still enormously important to her, but she realizes that the world will not end if her scarf drops.

As Mukhtar's fame grew, the government began to push back. President Musharraf was still aggrieved at her for "embarrassing" Pakistan, so his intelligence services harried her and her supporters. An arrest warrant was issued against one of Mukhtar's brothers on manifestly bogus charges. For a time, the Pakistani government denied us visas because we had championed her case and were close to her. The intelligence apparatus planted articles in Urdu-language newspapers accusing Mukhtar of extravagance (totally untrue) or of being a stooge for Indians and for Nick in their supposed efforts to harm Pakistan. Some upper-class Pakistanis, while originally sympathetic to Mukhtar, scorned her as an uneducated peasant and were uncomfortable with the way she was lionized abroad. They unsketchily accepted the slander that she was a money-hungry publicity hound, and they urged us to focus not on Mukhtar but on the work of doctors and lawyers in the cities. "Mukhtar means well, but she's just a peasant," one Pakistani told us scornfully. All the slanders left Mukhtar deeply wounded.

"My life and death is in God's hands," she said, as she had before. "That doesn't bother me. But why does the government keep treating me as if I were a liar and a criminal?"

"For the first time, I feel that the government has a plan to deal with me," Mukhtar added. The plan, she said, was to kill or imprison her or to fake a scandal to discredit her.



*Mukhtar today  
in her steadily  
expanding school*  
(Nicholas D. Kristof)

Sure enough, a senior police official warned that if she was uncooperative, the government would imprison her for fornication. Fornication? On any given night there were about a dozen other women taking shelter alongside Mukhtar on the floor of her bedroom (she gave the bed itself to Naseem Akhtar, her chief of staff). President Musharraf even sent a warning through a top aide to Amna Buttari, a courageous Pakistani-American physician who was planning to accompany Mukhtar on a visit to New York. Mukhtar should watch her tongue in America, because the Pakistani government could hire local thugs to kill her and make it look like a mugging. Buttari passed the warning on to us.

Naseem told us: "I want you to know that no matter how we are killed, even if it looks like an accident, it isn't. So if we die in a train accident, or a bus accident, or a fire—then tell the world that it was not actually an accident."

Mukhtar's courage is having an impact, and she has shown that great social entrepreneurs don't come just from the ranks of the privileged. Rapes used to be widespread in rural Pakistan, because there was no disincentive. But Mukhtar changed the paradigm, and women and girls began to fight back and go to the police.

In 2007, a case similar to Mukhtar's unfolded in a village called Habib Labano. A young man eloped with his high-caste girlfriend, outraging the girl's family. So a high-caste council resolved to take revenge on a sixteen-year-old-girl, Saima, who was a cousin of the young man. Eleven men kidnapped the girl and paraded her naked through the village, and then, on council orders, two men raped her.

Inspired by Mukhtar, Saima didn't kill herself. Instead, her family sought prosecution. Saima went for a medical checkup that confirmed the rape, and aid groups moved to help her. After a protest that blocked a road, the higher authorities fired two police officers and arrested five of the lower-ranking suspects. It wasn't exactly justice, but it was progress. Raping poor girls is no longer always a penalty-free sport, and so rapes appear to have declined considerably in the southern Punjab. There is no data, but inhabitants in village after village say that rapes used to be common and are now rare.

Mukhtar has also galvanized other change-makers, creating echoes of herself. Farooq Leghari is a bull of a man, a tough cop who speaks English and has been seasoned by service in some of the toughest parts of Pakistan. In a long conversation at a police post that he commands, he spoke of ruling by fear, of beating up suspects to make them confess. Everything he knew was the law of the jungle, and then he was sent to Meerwala to be the top cop looking after Mukhtar. He was taken aback by Mukhtar and her commitment to the poor and helpless, and in spite of himself he came to admire her deeply.

"It is a spiritual feeling," he recalled. "I am very glad when I see Mukhtaran Bibi going abroad, when she opens schools or shelters." As Farooq fell under Mukhtar's spell, he became increasingly uncomfortable with the orders from his superiors to spy on her and harass her. When his superiors scolded Farooq for protecting Mukhtar, he told his bosses of her wonderful work. That's when he was abruptly transferred to a distant police post. Farooq continued to denounce the persecution of Mukhtar publicly, so we asked him why he risked his career to stand up for a woman he was supposed to have punished.

"I have been a bad cop," he said. "To bad people, yes, but I was bad. One day I was thinking, in my life, have I ever done anything good? Well, now I have a chance from God to do something good. She is helping people, and I must help Mukhtaran Bibi. I must do something good. That is why in spite of every danger to my life, to my career, I support Mukhtaran Bibi."

Farooq said that his personnel reviews were now highly negative, and that his police career was effectively over. He feared that he could be murdered. But through watching Mukhtar, he had found a new purpose in life: protecting and speaking up for impoverished women in the villages.

After the Musharraf government collapsed in 2008, a cloud lifted from Mukhtar's operations. The intelligence agencies began to spy on terrorists instead of on Mukhtar. Pakistani spies no longer tailed us when Mukhtar showed us around the nearby villages. The government stopped harassing her, and the dangers eased just a little, allowing Mukhtar to step up her activities. In 2009, Mukhtar married a policeman who had long pleaded for her hand. She became his second wife, making Mukhtar an odd emblem of women's rights, but the marriage proceeded only after the first wife convinced Mukhtar that this was what she genuinely wanted. It was another unusual chapter in an unusual life. This uneducated woman from a tiny village had stood up to her country's president and army chief, and after years of enduring unremitting threats and harassment, she had outlasted him. She had taken a sordid tale of victimization and—through her extraordinary courage and vision—become an inspiration to us all.