

A Woman Without Importance

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF (NYT) 813 words

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KHANPUR, Pakistan - Aisha Parveen doesn't matter. She's simply one more impoverished girl from the countryside, and if her brothel's owner goes ahead and kills her, almost no one will care.

Ms. Parveen, an outspoken 20-year-old woman with flashing eyes, is steeling herself for a state-administered horror. Just two months after she escaped from the brothel in which she was tortured and imprisoned for six years, the courts are poised to hand her back to the brothel owner.

Sex trafficking, nurtured by globalization and increased mobility, is becoming worse. The U.N. estimates that one million children are held in conditions of slavery in Asia alone. Yet it never gets much attention, because the victims tend to be the least powerful people in these societies: poor and uneducated rural girls.

Ms. Parveen was a 14-year-old Pashtun living in the northwest of Pakistan when she was hit on the head while walking to school. She says she awoke to find herself imprisoned in a brothel hundreds of miles away, in this remote southeastern Pakistani town of Khanpur.

A person of unbelievable strength, Ms. Parveen fought back and refused to sleep with customers. So, she says, the brothel owner -- Mian Sher, the violent sadist who had kidnapped her -- beat and sexually tortured her, and regularly drugged her so that she would fall unconscious and customers could do with her as they liked.

This went on for six years, during which she says she was beaten every day. The girls in the brothel were forced to sleep naked at night, so that they would be too embarrassed to try to escape. Ms. Parveen says she believes that two of them, Malo Jan and Suwa Tai, were killed after they repeatedly refused to sleep with customers. In any case condoms were never available, so all the girls may eventually die of AIDS.

I wanted to look into the eyes of a man who could do these things. So I barged into Mian Sher's brothel, identified myself and interviewed him.

He warily offered me tea, pleasantries and flashes of violent temper. He denied kidnapping Ms. Parveen, saying that he had married her six years earlier. He also denied that he pimped the girls -- a claim undermined by a customer who was walking out of his brothel as I arrived. Others working in the area said that Mian Sher unquestionably ran a brothel, and that Ms. Parveen had been imprisoned in it. (Video of Ms. Parveen and the brothel is at nytimes.com/kristof.)

In January, Ms. Parveen got a break. A metalworker, Mohamed Akram, had been doing work in the brothel, and he pitied her. "She laid her scarf down on my feet and begged me, in the name of the Holy Koran, to rescue her," he remembers, and soon he felt not only pity but also love.

So on Jan. 5, Ms. Parveen stealthily arose in the middle of the night, crept past Mian Sher and padlocked the door with him inside. Then she ran to a car that Mr. Akram had sent. The next day, they were married.

Then the judicial nightmare began. Mian Sher brought charges against the couple, claiming that Ms. Parveen is his wife and must return to him.

"The police have taken money from him," Ms. Parveen said. "They say, 'You're married to him, so you should go back to him.' Well, I would rather die than go back to the brothel."

The police are now prosecuting Ms. Parveen for adultery. She is free on bail, but thugs have attacked her home and tried to kidnap her.

Mian Sher told me his plan: if Ms. Parveen is jailed for adultery, then as her supposed husband he will bail her out and take her away. Ms. Parveen says she believes he will then rape and torture her, and finally kill her.

So the judicial system, while ignoring the sex trafficking of children, may now, in the name of morality, hand a young woman over to a brothel owner to do with her as he wants.

The new abolitionism, against sex trafficking, is being pushed in America by an unlikely coalition of religious conservatives and liberal feminists; leaders include the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Ecpat, Equality Now and International Justice Mission. But progress is slow because the victims tend to be voiceless young people like Ms. Parveen.

Whether Ms. Parveen is returned to her brothel owner and killed may be, in terms of global issues, a small matter. But after spending a couple of days with this smart and lovely young woman, after seeing her in moments of giddy laughter and terrified weeping, I can't help thinking that slavery should be just as outrageous in the 21st century as it was in the 19th.

A court hearing to decide Ms. Parveen's fate is scheduled for tomorrow here in Khanpur. I'll let you know what happens.

In Disgrace, And Facing Death

By **NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF (NYT)** 771 words
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KHANPUR, Pakistan - Aisha Parveen will live another day. Indeed, at least another week.

Ms. Parveen, the young Pashtun woman I wrote about on Sunday, was kidnapped at the age of 14 and imprisoned in a brothel here in southeastern Pakistan for six years. She escaped in January and married the man who helped her flee, but now a Pakistani court has charged her with adultery and is threatening to hand her back to the brothel owner -- even though she is adamant that he will then torture and kill her.

Ms. Parveen's court hearing was yesterday, and I was afraid that would be the end. But the court adjourned the case for one week for further investigation. And Ms. Parveen's lawyer thinks the mood is different now: the Pakistani press picked up on my column, and the attention will make judges more careful about handling her.

So the publicity may save her life, but it won't make much difference for thousands of other Aisha Parveens around the world. Asma Jahangir, the chairwoman of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, said she sees cases like Ms. Parveen's all the time.

"There is no such thing called justice in Pakistan," said Ms. Jahangir, a prominent lawyer in Lahore. "It has simply collapsed."

Ms. Jahangir fights heroically for poor women who have been charged -- like Ms. Parveen -- with zina offenses under Islamic law. Zina encompasses fornication and adultery, and accusations of zina are effective weapons against women.

Landlords often evict women tenants, for example, by accusing them of zina. Worse, women who go to the police to report rapes can be arrested for zina, because they have acknowledged illicit sex and yet usually cannot provide four male witnesses to prove that it was rape.

Even professionals like Ms. Jahangir are targeted if they confront the government. Last year, for example, the police attacked her and a group of other middle-class women demonstrating for women's rights. She says that an aide to President Pervez Musharraf gave the police instructions about her: "Teach the [expletive] a lesson. Strip her in public." Sure enough, the police ripped off her shirt.

Ms. Parveen, now living in hiding after several kidnapping attempts in the last few days, faces an even more brutal struggle. Her only stroke of luck is having her new husband, Mohamed Akram, who rescued her from the brothel, on her side. The young couple are lovebirds, and each keeps talking about being so lucky to have found the other.

But Mr. Akram, while unwavering in his love, has disgraced his family by marrying a supposedly fallen woman, and his older sister is suffering.

"My brother-in-law sent me a message: 'Unless you divorce her, I will divorce your sister,'" Mr. Akram lamented. "She has two kids. And he's also beating her now. He's very upset because I married a girl who was in a brothel, who is not a virgin."

The couple cannot seek refuge with Ms. Parveen's parents, because Pashtun parents routinely protect their family honor by killing daughters accused of zina.

"I cannot go back there because if I do, they'll kill me," Ms. Parveen said. "In their eyes I'm dishonored, because even if a girl is kidnapped, then in their eyes she still should be killed."

Saddest of all, her story isn't newsworthy in a classic sense. There's nothing at all unusual about a young Asian woman suffering years of sexual enslavement, or judicial malpractice or murder.

And that's the challenge for us all, Asians and Americans alike -- to change our worldview and put gender issues like sex trafficking higher on the global agenda.

A quarter-century ago, Jimmy Carter plucked human rights abuses from the backdrop of the international arena and put them on the agenda. Now it's time to focus on **gender inequality in the developing world**, for that **is the greatest single source of human rights violations today**.

Political dissidents tend to get the world's attention. But for every dissident who is beaten to death by government torturers somewhere in the world, thousands of ordinary women or girls die prematurely because of the effects of discrimination. In India, for example, girls 1 to 5 years old are 50 percent more likely to die than boys of the same age, because the boys are favored. That differential accounts for the death of a young Indian girl every four minutes.

Since these victims usually are voiceless, I'll give Ms. Parveen the last word so she can prick our consciences.

"God should not give daughters to poor people," she said in despair. "And if a daughter is born, God should grant her death."