

Pakistan arrests suspect in highway gang rape case amid protests

One of two suspects arrested amid demonstrations over handling of probe into attack on mother travelling with children.

Al Jazeera (13.09.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3kfZNGp> – Pakistani police say they have arrested one of two suspects in the rape of a woman who was dragged from her car and attacked after her car broke down on a desolate highway in central Punjab province.

The woman, who police say is in her early 30s, was driving late on Wednesday night outside the eastern city of Lahore with her two children when her vehicle ran out of fuel.

She phoned the police for help, but before they arrived, two men took her and her children out of the vehicle at gunpoint and raped her in a field along the highway.

The suspects are also accused of stealing cash and jewelry from the woman before fleeing.

Chief of the criminal investigation wing of the Punjab police, Atif Nazeer, on Sunday said the arrest of one of the men was made after they tracked phone records and collected forensic evidence from the scene.

Nazeer said the suspect denies any involvement in the rape. Local media reported that the suspect turned himself over to police to plead his innocence.

The arrest came after protests continued across Pakistan for a second day on Saturday over the handling of an investigation into the assault.

Inam Ghani, Inspector General of Punjab province had told reporters on Saturday night that police had identified the two suspects through DNA tracing.

“I am hopeful very soon we will reach them and arrest them,” he said.

Musarrat Cheema, a spokesperson in the eastern Punjab province, said raids were being conducted to find the culprits.

Prime Minister Imran Khan’s office said the protection of women is a first priority and responsibility of the government, adding that “such brutality and bestiality cannot be allowed in any civilised society”.

But protesters are not satisfied, and called for the sacking of the lead police investigator assigned to the case, Omar Sheikh, who has reportedly pointed out what he felt the victim

had done wrong.

Sheikh is reported to have said the woman should have taken a different, busier, highway, not travelled at night, and made sure her vehicle had enough fuel.

He also said she appeared to be under the impression Pakistan was as safe for women as France, "her country of residence". Requests for comment to the French Embassy in Islamabad went unanswered

In Islamabad, several hundred protesters gathered, some waved French flags, and others held signs saying "hang the rapists".

"It's very simple, these sort of incidents are not very new the issue is that rather than catching the criminals or catching the perpetrators, we always blame the victims," said Aleena Alvi.

"I think the laws have also changed around the rape victims, there was a law of women's protection act, instead of this act, there has now been no protection that has been given to victims."

Hundreds, mostly women, also gathered in Lahore, Karachi, and the northwestern city of Peshawar. "Shatter the silence, stop the violence," read one placard in Peshawar.

Global rights watchdogs have pointed out that Pakistan has not done enough to stem violence against women, including ensuring perpetrators are held accountable.

The attack has especially angered women who say public space in the country was already limited.

“And now the police are telling you that you are responsible for your own safety,” said Yamna Rehman at the Islamabad protest, organised by the Women Democratic Front collective.

Zimbabwe makes it illegal for schools to expel pregnant girls

Women's rights campaigners say new law will help ensure girls have equal rights to an education.

By Farai Shawn Matiashe

Thomson Reuters Foundation (25.08.2020) – <https://tmsnrt.rs/3hNgYhN> – Zimbabwe has made it illegal for schools to expel pupils who get pregnant, a measure women's rights campaigners said would help tackle gender inequality in the classroom and stop many girls from dropping out of school.

A legal amendment announced last week seeks to reinforce a 1999 guideline that was patchily implemented, and comes as school closures due to coronavirus raise fears of a rise in sexual abuse and unwanted pregnancies.

Many parents of pregnant girls, or the girls themselves, decide to quit schooling due to the pregnancy, and schools do not always do enough to encourage them to stay, officials say.

“I’m expecting every parent and guardian and everyone else to understand that every child must be assisted by all of us to go to school,” Cain Mathema, the education minister in charge of schools, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation on Monday.

“Every child whether boy or girl... has a right to go to school in Zimbabwe,” he said.

In 2018, 12.5% of the country’s roughly 57,500 school dropouts stopped attending classes due to pregnancy or marriage reasons – almost all of them girls, according to Education Ministry statistics.

Priscilla Misihairwabwi-Mushonga, an opposition lawmaker who chairs a parliamentary education committee, said making the previous guidelines into a law with possible sanctions would make the rules more effective and address gender disparities.

“In circumstances where the pregnancy was a result of kids of the same age, the boy would not be necessarily expelled from

school," she said.

"It was also a double tragedy for the girl... as in most circumstances, it was not a consensual sex but some sort of abuse by some predator older than her. So, she has been traumatised and raped then she is further traumatised by being kicked out of school."

Nyaradzo Mashayamombe, founding director of advocacy group Tag a Life International and leader of a consortium of organizations that pushed for the law, said she feared lockdown measures may have caused a spike in unwanted teen pregnancies.

"We are in a dangerous time where children have been out of school for a long time. Most of them are not even attending radio and television lessons," she said, calling for the government to ensure the new law is enforced.

Pregnancy is just one of the reasons that girls in Zimbabwe could fail to return to classes after coronavirus restrictions are lifted, said Sibusisiwe Ndlovu, communications specialist at Plan International Zimbabwe.

Poverty and early marriage will also stop some from resuming their studies, she said, welcoming the new legislation as a step in the right direction.

"This amendment is crucial in fulfilling the access to

education right for all children – especially girls,” Ndlovu said.

However, campaigners in the southern African country say girls will still need extra support to continue with their studies even if they keep attending classes while pregnant.

“Social support and financial resources are required for girls to fully utilise this window of opportunity,” said Faith Nkala, national director of education nonprofit CAMFED Zimbabwe.

“Especially girls from marginalised families, who will need the additional support to remain in school, and to come back after giving birth.”

Iran’s #MeToo moment: Women’s tweets highlight alleged sexual abuse, rape by prominent figures

By Golnaz Esfandiari

RFE/RL (25.08.2020) – <https://bit.ly/32EJNGV> – For 14 years, former Iranian journalist Sara Omatali kept quiet about the

time she says a prominent painter sexually assaulted her.

Last week, the U.S.-based educator broke her silence on Twitter, detailing the alleged abuse that took place in the summer of 2006.

Omatali is one of many Iranian women who have in recent days taken to social media to tell their stories of sexual harassment and rape, breaking years of silence about an issue that remains taboo and is often swept under the rug in Iran.

Omatali said she had decided to interview the painter about an exhibition at the National Museum in Tehran. He insisted that she come to his office first, saying they would go to the exhibition together. After hesitating, she went to his office to find him naked under a brown cloak.

He then assaulted her, she said.

“He held me tightly, squeezing my body and trying to kiss my lips; I struggled as hard as I could to get rid of him,” she wrote on Twitter.

Omatali managed to escape into the street. The painter later came out and acted as if nothing had happened.

“He came toward me and said: ‘Shall we?’”

“It was as if I had no will of my own. I went,” Omatali said, adding that she still becomes full of “hatred, fear, and helplessness” when she recalls that day.

Spotlight on abuse

The outpouring of accounts about alleged sexual abuse, rape, and unwanted sexual advances and the number of women who have joined the movement, some anonymously, appears to be unprecedented in Iran, leading to comparisons with the global #metoo movement that has occurred around the world in recent years and putting a spotlight on such abuse.

One woman said she was raped by a friend after she visited him at his apartment. She had a glass of wine and woke up the next morning in his bed, naked, she said.

Others came forward claiming they had been raped by the same man, accusing him of drugging them beforehand.

Tehran police chief Hossein Rahimi said on August 25 that the man identified by the initials “KE” had been arrested after several women said they were raped by him.

Several others accused a known visual artist, as well as a popular writer, while at least one spoke of past sexual misconduct by a prominent filmmaker.

Some named their abusers publicly, others alluded to their identities. Several men also joined the campaign, tweeting about their experience with sexual abuse.

Fashion photographer Reihaneh Taravati said she had been sexually harassed by “one of the pioneers of Iranian photography” when she was 19, while artist Leva Zand wrote how her friend had been raped by a man whom she described as a well-known, New York-based, Iranian human rights activist.

At least one woman recounted how she sought legal action against her perpetrator that resulted in the punishment of her offender.

Several lawyers offered tips and legal advice to Iranian women who face discriminatory Islamic laws enforced following the 1979 Islamic Revolution that often favor men.

The global #metoo movement led to the downfall of a number of prominent figures, including the famous Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein, who is now in prison in New York.

The Iranian #metoo movement, which has resulted at this time in the arrest of one alleged rapist, appears to have empowered abuse survivors who had remained silent for years and, in some cases, blamed themselves for the predatory behavior of their abusers.

Omatali told RFE/RL she decided to publicize her alleged sexual harassment after reading some of the anonymous accounts of abuse that have been posted on social media in the past two weeks.

“I thought to myself, ‘you’re in the United States and have more freedom and protection than those in Iran to raise the issue publicly, why are you silent?’”

“I didn’t find an answer that would satisfy me, and so despite the pressure and anxiety I knew I would face, I decided to write about my experience, hoping that it would be a starting point for the publicizing of similar incidents,” Omatali said.

Absence of education

She expressed hope that the ongoing campaign will lead to increased awareness among people about the problems of sexual abuse and harassment.

“In the absence of systematic education about sexual issues in Iran, this group movement improves the atmosphere for a public discussion and creates a precious opportunity for education,” Omatali said.

Sexual abuse is believed to be widespread in Iranian society, where women often complain about being sexually harassed on the streets in the form of catcalling and groping.

Many women have also recounted in past days about being sexually assaulted at work while having no choice than to stay in contact with the offender, who is quite often the boss or a colleague.

Tehran-based sociologist Saeed Madani told RFE/RL's Radio Farda that in Iran, like other countries, many victims of sexual abuse and rape are reluctant to speak out.

"They aren't usually inclined to seek legal action, therefore the number of cases that are referred to the [authorities] is very limited and those very limited cases are not publicized," he said.

Madani referred to rape figures reported by the media as "the tip of the iceberg," saying the majority of the cases are not being reported.

"One report said that the highest incidents of rape are in Tehran, with about 1,600 sexual crimes being registered annually, but it is estimated that some 80 percent of rape cases are not being reported," he said.

One reason is the taboo surrounding the issue while victim blaming is also preventing women from coming forward.

"In a patriarchal society, it is assumed primarily that the

woman has done something wrong,” Madani said.

Veteran women’s rights advocate Susan Tahmasebi told RFE/RL that the current movement against sexual abuse and rape is likely to encourage more survivors of abuse to seek legal action.

“Already we see that the recounting of these stories has brought about change,” Tahmasebi said. “Besides raising awareness among women survivors of rape and sexual assault, sending them the message that they are not to blame and that they will be safe in coming forward.”

“It tells men that they can no longer continue their violent behavior against women with full impunity,” she added. “At least in the eyes of the community they will lose face and this has already happened in the case of some high-profile men.”

Uproar after Somali lawmaker presents bill to legalise child marriage

By Abdi Sheikh

Reuters (20.08.2020) – <https://reut.rs/34sZ9ko> – Hafsa was

married off at 13 by her father to a man who paid \$100. She and her mother say she was beaten and raped for two years before they convinced him to divorce her.

“The man just slept with me, beating me always,” she said, sitting by her mother, who clutches her daughter tightly. “I regretted I was born.”

There is no law mandating a minimum age for marriage in Somalia. A bill introduced in parliament this month by a presidential ally caused a storm of criticism from lawmakers when they realised it would legalise marriage at puberty – as early as 10 for some girls.

Data from a government survey this year shows that nearly a third of girls are married before their 18th birthday – just under half of those before the age of 15.

“Some families marry off their daughters to reduce their economic burden or earn income. Others may do so because they believe it will secure their daughters’ futures or protect them,” said Dheepa Pandian, a spokeswoman from UNICEF, the United Nations’ Children’s Fund.

Political turmoil in Somalia – the prime minister was sacked last month and elections due this year will likely be delayed – means it is unclear when parliament might vote on the bill. The Horn of Africa nation is also battling an Islamist insurgency.

Many lawmakers, like legislator and human rights activist Sahra Omar Malin, reject the bill.

“Our constitution is based on Islam. It says the age of maturity is 18, this is the right age for voting or for a girl to marry,” she said.

Deputy speaker Abdiweli Mudeey, who presented the bill, did not return calls seeking comment but told lawmakers that it had been reviewed by clerics and “this bill ... is the correct one based on Islam.”

Nadifa Hussein, who runs three camps in the capital for families fleeing violence, shelters many abused and abandoned child brides.

“Most women here were married at 13 and are divorced by the time they are 20,” Hussein said. “They have no one to feed them.”

Among them is Sirad, a shy 16-year-old with two children. Her husband has left, but if he comes back she must welcome him, she said sadly.

“Who else wants me?” she asked, covering her face. “If you are thrown into a well and can’t come out, the only option is to try to swim.”

Protecting Ecuador's students from sexual violence

Government should fully implement Inter-American Court ruling.

By Elin Martínez

HRW (20.08.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3aTt1rg> – The Inter-American Court of Human Rights last week ruled against Ecuador in its first ever case on school-related sexual violence in the Americas.

In 2001, a public school vice principal in the city of Guayaquil began raping a 14-year-old pupil, Paola Guzmán Albarracín. The abuses continued for over a year, with the knowledge and complicity of school officials. Yet the school did nothing to protect her, and in December 2002, Paola took her life. After her death, Paola's mother, Pepita Albarracín, filed complaints with the school and the local prosecutor's office. The judicial proceedings suffered serious delays.

Paola's case is unfortunately not unique: since then, many children and teenagers have suffered sexual violence in Ecuador's schools, and few receive justice.

Eighteen years after Albarracín first sought justice locally,

the Inter-American Court has found Ecuador responsible for violating Paola's rights to life, to study free from sexual violence, and to sexual and reproductive health and bodily autonomy, as well as her family's right to a fair trial and respect for their moral and psychological integrity. It ruled Ecuador did not comply with its obligations to protect children from sexual violence and prevent and respond to any acts of violence – especially those perpetrated by government officials in state institutions.

Human Rights Watch filed an amicus brief before the court, explaining the close relationship between sexual violence against girls and the lack of comprehensive sexuality education. The court recognized that Paola lacked necessary information about her sexual and reproductive health, concluding that the right to adequate sexuality education is an integral part of the right to education. It gave the government one year to guarantee that children are safe from sexual violence in its schools.

In a welcome departure from previous governments' longstanding failure even to recognize this problem, in 2017, President Lenín Moreno committed to zero tolerance for school-related sexual violence. This week, he reaffirmed his government's commitment and its plan to comply with the court's ruling.

The government should now publish a clear timeline for implementing measures ordered by the court, including by consulting young survivors of sexual violence. Ecuador should also back up this commitment by deploying resources to prevent sexual violence in schools and ensure that all child survivors have the access to justice that Paola's family was denied.