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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.

Pakistani female journalists face 'coordinated' campaign of online threats

RFE/RL (19.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3j4Lx2A> - Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is calling on Pakistani authorities to take immediate action to stop online harassment against female journalists that puts their professional duties and lives at risk.

The call from the Paris-based advocacy group on August 19 came in response to a joint statement signed by some 50 women journalists in Pakistan condemning a "well-defined and coordinated campaign" of harassment on social media, including abusive language and threats of violence.

"We regard the highest levels of the Pakistani government as either responsible or complicit in these recent cyberharassment campaigns against certain women journalists who don't toe the official line," said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk.

"This tactic, which clearly aims to intimidate all government critics, is a flagrant violation of article 19A of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan's constitution. We call on Prime Minister Imran Khan to ensure that this unacceptable use of hate speech is brought to a stop," he said.

The joint statement, issued on August 12, outlined online social media harassment of women journalists and commentators, alleging that the attacks are "instigated by government officials" and then amplified by pro-government Twitter accounts and trolls.

"The target of these attacks are women with differing viewpoints and those whose reports have been critical of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's government, and more specifically its handling of the coronavirus pandemic," the statement said.

Gender-based slurs

Types of harassment include threats of rape and physical violence, releasing personal details of women journalists and analysts, and gender-based slurs. The online-bullying

also seeks to discredit and intimidate journalists, referring to them as peddlers of "fake news" and an "enemy of the people."

"These have the potential to incite violence and lead to hate crimes, putting our physical safety at risk," the journalists wrote.

Women in the media, especially those on social-media platforms, are now reportedly finding it untenable to engage on social media, depriving them of their right to free speech and providing information to the public.

"Many now self-censor, refrain from sharing information, giving their opinion or actively engaging online," the statement said.

Pakistan is ranked 145th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index.

In 2019, four journalists and bloggers were killed in connection with their reporting.

Among them was Arooj Iqbal, who was shot dead in Lahore in November in a case that has gone unpunished.

Iqbal wanted to be the first woman journalist to launch her own newspaper in Pakistan, RSF said.

Teenage girls shot dead by relatives over online footage

Father of one victim and brother of the other arrested in connection with the murders.

By Hannah Ellis-Petersen

The Guardian (17.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bKqyOA> - Two female teenagers in Pakistan have been murdered by family members after a video emerged online of them associating with a man.

The pair, said to be aged 16 and 18, were shot dead by male relatives in their remote village in North Waziristan this week after footage was posted online of them in the company of a young man in a secluded area.

After they were shot, the pair were then buried in the village by their family members.

Local police confirmed they had arrested the father of one of the victims, and the brother of the other victim, in connection with arranging and carrying out the murders, and they were now being held in custody.

The police are searching for two other family members believed to have been involved in the killings.

The footage of the women, which is less than a minute long, was said to have been filmed last year but only appeared on social media a few weeks ago. The police said they were still searching for a third young woman who also featured in the video to ensure she did not suffer the same fate.

The tribal areas in North and South Waziristan, which borders Afghanistan, are known for the strict "honour code" imposed on women, whose movements are heavily restricted and who are often not allowed out of the house unaccompanied.

So called "honour" killings remain common in Pakistan's tribal areas, mainly against women who are believed to have brought shame on a family, and activists say up to 1,000 such killings are still carried out every year.

The issue was brought to the fore in Pakistan in September after three men were found guilty and sentenced to life behind bars for the killing of three women in Kohistan who had been caught on video singing and clapping at a wedding in 2011. The women's bodies were never found.

Though against the law, "honour" killing cases were previously difficult to convict owing to a loophole in the law that allowed perpetrators to walk free if they were given a pardon by the victim's family member.

However, the crimes now come with a mandated life sentence.

Several injured as conservatives throw stones at Women's Day March in Pakistan

RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal (08.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3cJf9Aj> - Several people were reportedly injured as social and religious conservatives clashed with International Women's Day demonstrators in Islamabad on March 8.

RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal reported that participants in a conservative demonstration called Modesty Walk threw stones at demonstrators holding a march to mark International Women's Day.

Ismat Shahjahan, head of the Women's Democratic Front, which organized the march, said four participants suffered head injuries, while three others were less seriously hurt.

Police intervened to stop the violence.

About 1,000 people participated in the Islamabad Women's March.

The Women's March was being held under the slogan, "My body, my choice." Conservative groups, including the Jamaat-e-Islami political party, criticized the initiative as threatening traditional Muslim values.

Many women participating in the rival Modesty Walk wore burqas and chanted, "Our bodies, Allah's choice."

Women's March events were also held in Quetta, Lahore, Karachi, and other cities.

Much of Pakistani society is strictly patriarchal and dominated by strict codes of "honor" that control women's choices regarding marriage, reproduction, education, and other issues.

About 1,000 Pakistani women each year are murdered in so-called "honor" killings, often by their own relatives.

How blackmail, harassment forced Pakistani women from university

Many parents pull out their daughters from Balochistan University after CCTV footage was used to blackmail students.

By Iman Sultan

Al Jazeera (09.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/35AkogX> - Rahila* had missed the deadline to submit her application for admission to Balochistan University, and feared she would now have to wait months before being able to apply again.

A teacher at the pharmacy department, however, offered to help her submit her forms and gain admission to the university, the main institute for higher education in the southwestern Pakistani province after which it is named.

After she filled out the forms, however, she alleges the same teacher began to harass her by sending her text messages, mostly at night, and threatened to cancel her admission when she did not reply to him.

"From his words, I could tell his intentions were not good," Rahila, 20, said. "I felt so strange about it. I used to call him 'sir' with so much respect to his face, and he turned out to be this creepy, inappropriate person. At that point, I lost confidence in myself."

Rahila's experience is just one of many cases of alleged sexual harassment at this government-run university, where allegations have been made that university officials used CCTV footage of male and female students mingling to extort and blackmail them.

Balochistan has a female literacy rate of 33.5 percent, and the danger of harassment is often cited by parents who refuse to send their daughters to school. Only 5.07 percent of Pakistan's roughly 102 million women ever complete university, according to the country's bureau of statistics.

In October last year, the Balochistan High Court directed the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to investigate the allegations against university officials, directing officials to submit a full report on the blackmail allegations.

News of the scandal led Javed Iqbal, the university's vice-chancellor, to step down, and many parents pulled their daughters out of the university.

"All the struggle people did for women's education has suffered a setback of 20 or 30 years because of this scandal," said Shain Taj Raisani, 26, an MPhil student at the university.

"Girls who were coming into the education field with their opinions now feel threatened."

Education a key battleground

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest but least populated province, is rich in mineral resources and is home to a port at the heart of China's \$60bn China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project that runs through the country.

The province is, however, one of the least developed parts of the country, with its vast, rugged terrain only sparsely populated by small towns and villages.

Education is a key battleground. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, less than 12 percent women in Balochistan made it past primary school.

Many say the recent scandal has led to even more parents pulling their daughters out of higher education.

"A [university] hostel is like a home [...] if your daughter isn't safe at school, then her parents won't let her study at the university," Mahrang Baloch, 25, a student at Bolan Medical College located in the provincial capital Quetta, added.

Security on campus

Home to about 10,000 students, Balochistan University is not your typical university campus. Located on Sariab Road in the southern quarter of Quetta, the area has often been the site of suicide bombings or targeted attacks against security forces or, on occasion, university officials.

"Many professors have fallen victim to this terrorism in the past 12 years," said a senior FIA official investigating the video scandal case. "Both professors and students have been martyred. We've lost too many people," the officer, who wished to remain anonymous, told Al Jazeera.

CCTV cameras have been installed all over the campus to safeguard students and faculty against that threat, and both police and paramilitary soldiers are stationed across the university.

Students, however, fear that the pervasive security on campus had undermined their learning experience. Others say it has contributed to the atmosphere of harassment at the university.

"When I was at university, [the paramilitary Frontier Corps] had made its checkpoints everywhere. They would harass and throw their numbers [written on pieces of paper] at women," Yassir Baloch, 27, who graduated from the university in 2017, said.

"And they'd sexually harass and blackmail young men, who had just come from college and were 20 or 21 years old. Sometimes, [security and university officials] would catch couples too. They'd tell them we'll show this video to your parents. If you give us Rs 50,000 [roughly \$320], we'll delete the video."

Wali Rehman, the registrar of the university, however, said paramilitary soldiers don't interfere in the "academic blocks", but pass through "university-regulated areas, grounds, sports area and colony".

"Frontier Corps isn't there to tell students what to do or not to do. They only come if there's danger," he told Al Jazeera.

In November, security forces agreed to vacate the university after a parliamentary committee recommended universities reevaluate the deployment of security forces amid public pressure in the wake of the CCTV scandal.

The misuse of cameras

The university currently has 56 CCTV cameras in operation, down from 94 cameras, three of which did not work. According to the registrar, the university disconnected "unnecessary" cameras, referring to the installation of CCTV in "unauthorised" places.

"At the direction of the court, we disconnected 37 cameras. Cameras that were in places where they were not needed were uninstalled," Rehman, the registrar, told Al Jazeera.

During the investigation into the video scandal, the FIA obtained university and security officials' laptops and mobile phones, and Saifullah Langove, the head of the security control room, was removed from his post.

The senior FIA official investigating the case said there was no standard operating procedure for how the data collected on them would be used.

"Cameras wouldn't have been misused if the protocol was defined," he said.

The university said it is now developing a new policy for how the cameras will be used and who controls them.

There, is, however, scepticism among digital rights activists on the effectiveness of such surveillance systems, and their effects.

"Technology will enable universities to see their students on all corners and regulate them. When you feel you are being watched, you'll start to behave how authority wants you to," said Shmyla Khan, a project manager for Digital Rights Foundation.

Meanwhile, a sexual harassment committee has been set up in the university, headed by Sobiah Ramzan of the Institute of Management Sciences. The local provincial committee is also investigating the affair.

An ongoing investigation

Women who have faced harassment at the university may be too scared to come forward because of the shame associated with sexual assault in a tribal society.

"If something happened to me, even if I wanted to come forward, I wouldn't be able to confess because we live in a tribal society," Sadia Baloch, a 19-year-old student at the university's law college, said. "On account of our families, we can't even talk about it."

The FIA officer said that he had been investigating the case for months, and the media had, in fact, frightened away victims, who may have otherwise come forward to assist with the investigation.

"We live in a very conservative society [in Balochistan]. If there are victims, they don't want to come forward anymore," he said.

Students who claim to be in contact with sexual harassment victims confirmed to Al Jazeera that many "girls are scared" and do not trust that their privacy would be protected through the investigation process.

"Who can guarantee if a girl comes forward, her information won't be leaked?" Mahrang Baloch told Al Jazeera.

PTI lawmakers reject child marriage bill

PTI's MNAs left standing committee meeting at the time of voting on bill

By Zubair Qureshi

Gulf News (25.08.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2maMyy7> - Citizens of Pakistan have criticised Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) for rejecting a bill banning underage marriages.

The bill was rejected by voting in a meeting of the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Law & Justice held on August 21.

PTI MNA Riaz Fatyana was in the chair while another MNA of the party Dr Ramesh Kumar was the mover of the bill.

Opposition to a bill — which was passed by the Sindh Assembly in 2014 and was widely accepted in society — came from PTI and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) parliamentarians while Pakistan People's Party MNAs and Dr Kumar voted in its favour.

In May, Dr Kumar presented the bill in the National Assembly. The bill seeks to set the minimum marriageable age in Pakistan at 18.

The bill, however, drew uproar from the party's own MNAs and also from the JUI-F and the Speaker National Assembly Asad Qaiser had to refer it to the National Assembly Committee on Law and Justice.

Silent opposition

While talking to Gulf News, Dr Kumar said in Wednesday's Standing Committee meeting it was decided that the bill should be passed or rejected through voting.

"When the voting was about to begin, I noticed the PTI MNAs started leaving the committee one by one. I asked them not to leave as we needed votes for the approval of the bill in the standing committee but unfortunately they left and those opposing the bill were in majority," said a disappointed Dr Kumar.

In this way they showed their silent opposition to the bill, he added.

Even within the cabinet, ministers are divided on the bill. Human Rights Minister Dr Shireen Mazari argued in support of the bill and asked the chair to refer it to the committee concerned, while Religious Affairs Minister Noorul Haq Qadri and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ali Mohammad Khan spoke against it.

Chairperson of National Council on Status of Women Khawar Mumtaz at a report launch on Friday said the members who opposed the bill needed to understand the sensitivity of the issue. How can we expect children to take decision on marriage at that tender age, she asked.

Valerie Khan, a women's rights activist, said it was irresponsible, ill-informed and disappointing for elected representatives who claim to protect the most vulnerable to reject the bill while supporting an agenda of development in the country.

This act of the parliamentarians rejecting a ban on child marriages amounts to supporting bigotry and darkness, she added.

Iftikhar Mubarik, executive director of Search For Justice, an NGO working to strengthen child rights and protection work in Pakistan, said it is very strange that any child below the 18 years is not eligible to vote, obtain a Computerised National Identity Card or driving license but can be married before that age, and the law is protecting this.

Article 25 of the Constitution of Pakistan states that all citizens are equal before law and there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex alone. Is the discrepancy among boys and girls only with reference to marriage is not contradicting the constitution, asked Mubarik.

In Pakistan, the practice of marrying off young girls is common, particularly in low-income families but action cannot be taken against offenders.

Pakistani Christian girls trafficked to China as brides

By Kathy Gannon and Dake Kang

AP News (07.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2PSpNtD> - Muqadas Ashraf was just 16 when her parents married her off to a Chinese man who had come to Pakistan looking for a bride. Less than five months later, Muqadas is back in her home country, pregnant and seeking a divorce from a husband she says was abusive.

She is one of hundreds of poor Christian girls who have been trafficked to China in a market for brides that has swiftly grown in Pakistan since late last year, activists say. Brokers are aggressively seeking out girls for Chinese men, sometimes even cruising outside churches to ask for potential brides. They are being helped by Christian clerics paid to target impoverished parents in their congregation with promises of wealth in exchange for their daughters.

Parents receive several thousand dollars and are told that their new sons-in-law are wealthy Christian converts. The grooms turn out to be neither, according to several brides, their parents, an activist, pastors and government officials, all of whom spoke to The Associated Press. Once in China, the girls — most often married against their will — can find themselves isolated in remote rural regions, vulnerable to abuse, unable to communicate and reliant on a translation app even for a glass of water.

“This is human smuggling,” said Ijaz Alam Augustine, the human rights and minorities minister in Pakistan’s Punjab province, in an interview with the AP. “Greed is really responsible for these marriages ... I have met with some of these girls and they are very poor.”

Augustine accused the Chinese government and its embassy in Pakistan of turning a blind eye to the practice by unquestioningly issuing visas and documents. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied that, saying China has zero tolerance for illegal transnational marriage agencies.

Human Rights Watch called on China and Pakistan to take action to end bride trafficking, warning in an April 26 statement of “increasing evidence that Pakistani women and girls are at risk of sexual slavery in China.”

On Monday, Pakistan’s Federal Investigation Agency arrested eight Chinese nationals and four Pakistanis in raids in Punjab province in connection with trafficking, Geo TV reported. It said the raids followed an undercover operation that included attending an arranged marriage.

The Chinese embassy said last month that China is cooperating with Pakistan to crack down on unlawful matchmaking centers, saying “both Chinese and Pakistani youths are victims of these illegal agents.”

The Associated Press interviewed more than a dozen Christian Pakistani brides and would-be brides who fled before exchanging vows. All had similar accounts of a process involving brokers and members of the clergy, including describing houses where they were taken to see potential husbands and spend their wedding nights in Islamabad, the country’s capital, and Lahore, the capital of Punjab province.

“It is all fraud and cheating. All the promises they make are fake,” said Muqadas.

Supply and demand

In China, demand for foreign brides has mounted, a legacy of the one-child policy that skewed the country’s gender balance toward males. Brides initially came largely from Vietnam, Laos and North Korea. Now men are looking further afield, said Mimi Vu, director of advocacy at Pacific Links, which helps trafficked Vietnamese women.

“It’s purely supply and demand,” she said. “It used to be, ‘Is she light-skinned?’ Now it’s like, ‘Is she female?’”

Pakistan seems to have come onto marriage brokers’ radar late last year.

Saleem Iqbal, a Christian activist, said he first began to see significant numbers of marriage to Chinese men in October. Since then, an estimated 750 to 1,000 girls have been married off, he said.

Pakistan’s small Christian community, centered in Punjab province, makes a vulnerable target. Numbering some 2.5 million in the country’s overwhelmingly Muslim population of 200 million, Christians are among Pakistan’s most deeply impoverished. They also have little political or social support.

Among all faiths in Pakistan, parents often decide a daughter’s marriage partner. The deeply patriarchal society sees girls as less desirable than boys and as a burden because the bride’s family must pay a dowry and the cost of the wedding when they marry. A new bride is often mistreated by her husband and in-laws if her dowry is considered inadequate.

By contrast, potential Chinese grooms offer parents money and pay all wedding expenses.

Some of the grooms are from among the tens of thousands of Chinese in Pakistan working on infrastructure projects under Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative, a project that has further boosted ties between the two countries in recent years. Other grooms search directly from China through networks. They present themselves as Christian converts, but pastors complicit in the deals don’t ask for any documentation.

They pay on average \$3,500 to \$5,000, including payments to parents, pastors and a broker, said Iqbal, who is also a journalist with a small Christian station, Isaac TV. Iqbal has gone to court to stop marriages and sheltered runaway brides, some as young as 13.

Muqadas’ mother Nasreen said she was promised about \$5,000, which included the cost of the wedding and her daughter’s wedding dress. “But I have not seen anything yet,” she said.

"I really believed I was giving her a chance at a better life and also a better life for us," Nasreen said.

Priests and brokers

Dozens of priests are paid by brokers to find brides for Chinese men, said Augustine, the provincial minorities minister, who is Christian. Many are from the small evangelical churches that have proliferated in Pakistan.

Gujranwala, a city north of Lahore, has been a particular target of brokers, with more than 100 local Christian women and girls married off to Chinese in recent months, according to Iqbal.

The city has several mainly Christian neighborhoods, largely dirt poor with open sewers running along narrow slum streets. Tucked away in the alleys are numerous evangelical churches, small cement structures unrecognizable except for small crosses outside.

Pastor Munch Morris said he knows a group of pastors in his neighborhood who work with a private Chinese marriage broker. Among them, he said, is a fellow pastor at his church who tells his flock, "God is happy because these Chinese boys convert to Christianity. They are helping the poor Christian girls."

Morris opposes such marriages, calling them an insult. "We know these marriages are all for the sake of money."

Rizwan Rashid, a parishioner at the city's Roman Catholic St. John's Church, said that two weeks earlier, a car pulled up to him outside the church gates. Two Pakistani men and a Chinese woman inside asked him if he knew of any girls who want to marry a Chinese man.

"They told me her life would be great," he said. "Everything would be paid for by them."

They were willing to pay him to help, but he said the church's priest often warns his flock against such marriages, so he refused.

Brokers also troll brick kilns, where the poorest work essentially as slaves to pay off debts, and offer to pay off their workers' debts in exchange for daughters as brides.

Pakistani and Chinese brokers work together in the trade. One prominent broker in Gujranwala is a Pakistani known only as Robinson. He refused to talk to the AP, but his wife Razia told the AP that they make arrangements through a Chinese marriage bureau in Islamabad.

Moqadas and another young woman from the same neighborhood, Mahek Liaqat, said Robinson arranged their marriages, providing photos of potential grooms. Afterward, they each described being taken to the same, multi-story house in Islamabad, a sort of boarding house with bedrooms. There, each met her husband for the first time face-to-face and spent her wedding night.

Mahek, 19, said she stayed there with her husband for a month, during which she saw several other girls brought in. She attended several weddings performed in the basement.

Other brides told of meeting their husbands at a similar house in a posh neighborhood of Lahore.

Simbal Akmal, 18, was taken there by her parents. Two other Christian girls were already there in a large sitting room, picking grooms. Three Chinese men were presented to Simbal, and her father demanded she choose one. She told him she didn't want to marry, but he insisted, claiming "it was a matter of our honor," she said.

"He had already promised I would marry one," she said. "They just wanted money."

She married, but immediately fled. She was joined by her sister, who refused her parents' demands to marry a Chinese man. Both escaped to a refuge run by the activist, Iqbal.

In China

Muqadas said her husband had claimed to be a man of money, but when she arrived in China in early December, she found herself living "in a small house, just one room and a bedroom."

She said he rarely let her out of the house on her own. He forced her to undergo a battery of medical tests that later she found were attempts to determine why she was not yet pregnant. On Christmas Eve, when she pressed him to take her to church, he slapped her and broke her phone, she said.

"I don't have the words to tell you how difficult the last month there was," said Muqadas. "He threatened me."

Finally, he agreed to send her home after her family said they would go to the police.

Mahek said she hadn't wanted to get married, but her parents insisted. Her Chinese husband was possessive and refused to let her leave the house. "He was just terrible," she said.\$

In China, her husband, Li Tao, denied abusing Mahek. He said he was a Christian convert and worked for a state-owned Chinese company building roads and bridges when he met Mahek through a Pakistani matchmaker introduced by a Chinese friend.

He was taken by her at first sight, he said. "If you look at her and you see she's right for you, that's it, right?"

Li returned with Mahek last winter to his hometown of Chenlou, a village surrounded by wheat fields in coastal Jiangsu province. They moved into his mother's home, a one-story courtyard house.

After Malek's family reached out to their government for help to bring her back, the police showed up at Li's home and said they were told he was illegally confining a woman in his home.

He said it was Mahek who refused to go outside.

"I wouldn't force her into doing anything," Li said. "She just had to learn to adapt to a new environment. I wasn't asking her to change right away." Still, he bought plane tickets to take her back to Pakistan.

Others, however, are unable to come back.

Mahek's grandfather Idriis Masih said he contacted the parents of several other Pakistani girls whom Mahek had befriended through a phone app in China and who were desperate to return home. All the parents were poor and shrugged off his attempts to convince them to retrieve their daughters.

Each told him, "She is married now. It is her life," he said.

Senate passes bill to fix marriage age as 18 for girls

-Bill was sent to CII years ago where it remained untouched without any discussion

-Muslim countries that have declared 18 years as age of puberty include Bangladesh, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Oman, UAE, and even Saudi Arabia

Pakistan Today (29.04.2019). - <https://bit.ly/2vHECGb> - The Senate on Monday passed a bill to amend the Child Marriage Restraint Bill, 1929, to set the minimum age to be able to marry as 18 years.

Senator Sherry Rehman, who presented the bill, was met with heated remarks by senators belonging to Islamist parties.

Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) Senator Ghafoor Haidri raised an objection saying that fixing the age as 18 years for nikah is inconsonant with shariah law, therefore, the bill should be sent to Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) for further discussion.

Similarly, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) Senator Mushtaq Ahmad seconded Haideri's suggestion to send the bill to CII, saying that it is against article 2-A of the constitution and against sharia. He suggested reducing the age of puberty from 18 to 15 instead.

Senator Maulana Atta-ur-Rehman also opposed the bill on the grounds that the committee did not invite ulema for consultation.

Senator Maulana Faiz Muhammad said that the Senate is not a proper forum to discuss matters like this.

State Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Ali Muhammad Khan said that although the intent of the bill is noble, some issues require consultation as the country came into being in the name of Islam. "The Constitution binds us to make legislation in consonant with Islamic laws," he said.

However, Senator Raza Rabbani apprised the house that the bill was earlier sent to the CII; however, it remained there for years without any discussion on the matter.

He said that the Sindh Assembly has already passed the same bill and it was not challenged or opposed at any forum and added that the age of puberty of girls in all other Islamic countries is 18 years.

Federal Minister for Religious Affairs Noor-ul-Qadri said that a similar bill was sent to the CII in 2010 by former parliamentarians Marvi Memon and Atiya Anayatullah which was returned by the council with the observation that the age of puberty varies and cannot be fixed according to Fuqaha.

While urging the Senate chairman for voting on the bill, Sherry Rehman said that since the age of voting and eligibility for a national identity card (NIC) is 18, the age of puberty should also be fixed accordingly. "Muslim countries that have declared 18 years as the

age of puberty include Bangladesh, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Oman, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and even the Saudi Arabia," she informed while adding that the age of puberty in Algeria is 19.

"We are not promoting western values but trying to save innocent lives. As many as 21 per cent of marriages in our country are child marriages. One Pakistani woman dies every 20 minutes due to childbirth at a young age," she said.

Leader of the house, Senator Shibli Faraz, favoured the bill saying he was part of the committee that deliberated on the bill and the CII never took a clear stance on the issue when their opinion was sought.

Senator Sassui Palijo added the girls in Pakistan are exploited in the name of religion. She said that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was the first one who protected girls and gave them rights in the time when they were buried alive and since the country was created in the name of Islam we should follow his example of granting our girls the safety and life they deserve.

Senator Farooq H Naik said that Islamic jurisprudence allows a man to marry four women but it must be kept in mind that according to the Muslim Family Ordinance, 1961, a man must seek the consent of his first wife before entering a second marriage and if he does not do so then he will be punished but the marriage will not be invalidated.

Senator Mushahid Ullah said that such legislation would be very effective to ensure discipline in society and curb the exploitation of women.

Senator Taj Roohani said that even from a medical point of view, the age of puberty is 18 years; however, a few girls reach puberty earlier because of good nutrition and genes.

Winding up the debate on the bill, the Senate chairman sought voting and passed the bill with the opposition of five votes.

The Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Bill, 2018, which aims to "curb the menace of child marriage prevalent in the country and save women from exploitation", underage marriage can lead to imprisonment of up to three years, a fine of at least Rs100,000 or both.

Young Pakistani Christian girl aged 13 abducted and forced into Islamic marriage

Pakistan Christian Post (06.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ul0kPr> - A young girl barely in her teens, Sadaf Amir also known as Sadaf Masih (13 yrs), of Cholistan, Wichra Bangla, Bahawalpur was abducted on 6 February 2019 by influential Muslims Maqbool Hussain, Mubashir Hussain Baloch and Azhir Hussain Baloch.

Following the kidnapping the perpetrators' family informed Sadaf's family she had been taken but promised, that they would bring her back.

Wanting to believe them and fearing an altercation, Sadaf's family waited 8 days to hear whether the kidnappers would actually return their young daughter.

However instead the perpetrators returned to declare that the girl, who is not old enough to be legally married in Pakistan, was now not only "married" but had converted to Islam.

The kidnapper's malice became clear when they showed the distressed family a falsified marriage certificate with her age listed as 18-years-old.

In typical use of the blasphemy law against religious minorities, the offending Muslim family said they would employ their influence with local law enforcement authorities, if the family ever tried to contact the young girl again. Worse still, they warned the beleaguered Christian family that they would accuse them of harassing the newlyweds if they took any action.

With the threat of a FIR hanging over the heads of Christian families in the village, they were forcibly intimidated into backing away from the situation at that time.

The police have been derelict in their duty to bring the obviously underaged girl back to her family, even though a case has now been registered against the culprits with the assistance of CLAAS, a charity that helps with legal cases, following an order of the session court.

These heinous is widely known in the NGO and human rights community, as a Muslim charity called "The Movement Towards Solidary and Peace" raised the alarm with their rather conservative statistic of 1000 religious minority girls being kidnapped, raped and forced into Islamic marriage every year. ([click here](#))

These depraved abductions, rapes and forced conversions continue to occur despite legislation The Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act of 2016 being passed into law to protect religious minorities and children.

The Pakistani government has been disinclined to take action to help these young girls, and even when the marriage is clearly illegal, they fail to secure the girls a proper divorce. As in the case of another young girl Elisha (12) whose family sold themselves into slavery to pay for a lawyer to help them get her back.

The bullying by officials begins. with the police and follows families in this situation throughout the court system The anguish they experience is so great that instead of the culprits being charged all the pressure is exerted on the victim's families to get them to drop the case.

Legal authorities usually side with Muslim kidnappers and do not believe that the now supposedly Islamic wife's conversion was forced. The reality is that these young girls, are often threatened, and told their families will be harmed if they do not comply or agree to whatever they told to do. When they are interviewed in a civil court, they are found not to have adequate knowledge to be deemed a Muslim convert.

Wilson Chowdhry said: "Sadaf an extremely vulnerable Christian girl joins a long list of victims who have been kidnapped by prominent Muslim men who are sexual predators.

"One can only estimate the amount of violence and degradation this poor child has had to endure whilst in captivity. The graphic account provided by Australian on-line grooming victim Lara Hall suggests Sadaf is being subjected to on-tap sexual servitude.

"While the numbers of forced Islamic marriage victims in Pakistan increases the world stays silent on this debilitating social malaise. Young BPCA volunteer Hannah Chowdhry recently reported how the average age of these victims is 13 yrs and Sadaf is an example of that average.

"The world has learnt nothing from the terrible accounts of grooming that have taken place across the UK, from Pakistani origin Muslim men.

"This social malaise is not something that stems from British values imposed on the UK Pakistani community but is an undesirable export from the Pakistani homeland - one that elicited a comment from Sajid Javid UK Home Secretary that BPCA wishes had been stronger.

"Ignoring the problem only serves to foster resentment and creates societal schism - perhaps allocating a proportion of the huge amounts of foreign aid sent to Pakistan to tackling this despicable social deviance would serve great purpose across the globe.

"Muslims who feel any level of sensitivity about this practice should endeavour to end it, rather than social-media trolling of those who are simply reporting them. People should be more disturbed that this is happening, than by the fact they are being informed about it."

Young Pakistani man, woman slain in suspected honor killing

Fox13 Memphis (23.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Yf8NBI> - Pakistani police say a young man and a woman have been killed in the country's commercial hub, Karachi, allegedly by relatives over a perceived affront to family honor.

Officer Idrees Bangash says Saturday that Naseeb Khan, 25, and Bibi Dakhtar 20, were found dead with slit throats in the city's western suburbs three days ago.

Bangash said initial findings revealed that they both belonged to the conservative Pashtun tribe and resided in the same neighborhood. They went missing last year. He suspects they were killed on the orders of an elders' council. He added that the woman family's has absconded, and no arrests have yet been made.

More than 1,000 women are slain every year by relatives in so-called "honor killings" in the conservative, Muslim-majority country.

Pakistan set to raise minimum marriageable age to 18 after govt says it has no objections

A bill to raise the minimum marriageable age in Pakistan to 18 is destined for smooth sailing as the government has told the opposition senator who presented it that it has no objections.

Zaheer Ali Khan

SAMAA (30.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2G0x2gM> - Senator Sherry Rehman presented an amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 that states that the minimum marriageable age in Pakistan is 16 during a meeting of the Senate Committee on Human Rights on Wednesday.

Senator Rehman proposed that the minimum age be raised to 18.

Chaired by Senator Mustafa Nawaz Khokar, the committee approved her amendment and Federal Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari said the government has no objections to raising the minimum marriageable age.

She said the bill has been sent to the cabinet for approval and will be presented before parliament for final approval next month.

Senator Rehman is a member of the PPP, which has already raised the minimum marriageable age to 18 in Sindh. Incidents of child marriage are common in Pakistan, she told the committee.

Many women aren't ready even upon reaching the minimum age, she said, adding that Pakistan is ranked number two in child marriages in the world.

Senator Muzaffar Hussain Shah of the PML-F said the Islamic Ideology Council's opinion should be sought before the bill is put to parliament. However, his suggestion was opposed by Barrister Muhammad Ali Khan Saif of the MQM, who said there is no need to drag the Islamic Ideology Council into every matter.

Their opinion is not necessary for legislation, he argued.

Khokhar said that child marriage is a social issue in Pakistan. Passing this bill will send a good message from the Centre to the provinces, he said.

Child marriage and the law

By Sherry Rehman

The International News (16.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2DBKwx6> - Pakistan's children are its future. Yet not only is this generation put to work in homes, fields and factories, they are also the silent objects of abuse and violence in ways that shock and stagger society.

Most vulnerable in this generation are the young girls and boys forced to be married off before they reach any minimum level of adulthood. Girls especially offal victim to such customs, with their bodies becoming the site of chilling exploitation through forced pregnancies and other predations including rape.

The task before us is very clear. We must do two things right away. The bill that has been introduced in the Senate recently has been through enough paths of compromise in the committee and at other forums like the Islamic Ideology Council, when Senator Sehar Kamran initially introduced it. The new amended bill to ban child marriage that I have laid before parliament has added key clauses after stakeholder consultations from the field.

Essentially, if it passes standing committees and votes in both the Senate and the National Assembly, the Child Marriage Restraint Bill will ban marriages before the age of 18. It will also clear the confusion about the definition and age of a child, which will also be 18, for the purposes of rights and obligations. This definition matters because children are forced into adulthood too early.

Right now, Pakistan's federal law is still based around an act passed in 1929, in which the British rulers of India had fixed the age of consent at 14. It was improved to 16 by the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961. After 2010, the prevention of child marriages became a provincial subject, although the Islamabad Capital Territory still fell under

federal law, which continues to exercise an important framework reference for human rights obligations and precedence.

The view from the provinces, which also enforce their own laws, is patchy. Sindh is the only province so far to have passed a similar law, barring marriage until the age of 18. In Sindh, which provides a model law for the federation and other provinces, the law makes under-age marriages a cognizable and non-compoundable offence. This means that the police can take action on their own to arrest offenders upon any information, and no private justice deals can be made between families, communities or jirgas to bypass the law.

The Punjab Marriage Restraint Act, meanwhile, still allows girls to be married off at 16. The 2015 law allows the police to register a case to stop child marriages, but they are not empowered to make arrests. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan continue to be governed by a 1929 Act, like the federal law, which we seek to change.

The case for such a law is very clear. According to Unicef, 21 percent of girls in Pakistan are married under the age of 18. Three percent are married under the age of 15, but these are illusory statistics. In many cases the mapping of such practices on the ground is poor, especially in rural areas, so the reality may likely be worse. The social implications of early marriage are also well documented. Girls who marry too early or in early adolescence are more likely to drop out of school than others. As it is, 22.84 million children are out of school in Pakistan, which in itself is a staggering number. Thirty-two percent of primary school aged girls are not only out of school but drop out, so that by 9th grade only 13 percent remain in school, according to Human Rights Watch.

When girls are forced to marry at an early age, they are more likely to face domestic violence, and such marriages render them at risk for early pregnancies and malnutrition. It is no secret that the high rates of maternal and infant death in Pakistan have a close link to early marriage, and like other developing countries the leading cause of death for young girls is early pregnancy, usually between the ages of 15 and 18.

The above-ground statistics for Pakistan, like the tip of the iceberg, are chilling. Every 20 minutes a Pakistani woman dies from childbirth or complications in pregnancy. This in many parts is attributable to a shockingly large number of women, especially under-age girls, having little power or agency over their bodies, nutrition, or even the lives and care of the children they bear. This is also why infant mortality is such a statistic of shame: as of updated surveys, 64 infants die per 1000 live births, which puts Pakistan at the highest rate of infant mortality in Asia, worse than war-ravaged Afghanistan or even Yemen, according to the World Bank.

It is imperative then, that a changed model law must govern federal principles, as well as the provinces. The real challenge will lie in implementation, where the production of a CNIC should also be made mandatory for the registration of marriages, which carry on being recognised without the requisite identity documentation to support the marriage contract.

Pakistan must not use religion or custom or whataboutery to send this law for consultation to any committee outside parliament. At stake is the country's future, its children and its fundamental rights.

The writer is parliamentary leader of the PPP in the Senate. She has also served as Pakistan's ambassador to Washington.

Girls deprived of education

Barriers include underinvestment, fees, discrimination

Human Rights Watch (12.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2T6ql01> - The Pakistan government is failing to educate a huge proportion of the country's girls, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

The 111-page report, "Shall I Feed My Daughter, or Educate Her?": Barriers to Girls' Education in Pakistan," concludes that many girls simply have no access to education, including because of a shortage of government schools – especially for girls. Nearly 22.5 million of Pakistan's children – in a country with a population of just over 200 million – are out of school, the majority of them girls. Thirty-two percent of primary school age girls are out of school in Pakistan, compared with 21 percent of boys. By ninth grade, only 13 percent of girls are still in school.

"The Pakistan government's failure to educate children is having a devastating impact on millions of girls," said Liesl Gertholtz, women's rights director at Human Rights Watch. "Many of the girls we interviewed are desperate to study, but instead are growing up without the education that would help them have options for their future."

Human Rights Watch interviewed 209 people for the report – most of them with girls who never attended school or were unable to complete their education, and their families – in all four of Pakistan's provinces: Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh. Human Rights Watch also interviewed parents, educators, experts, and activists, and visited schools.

Among the factors keeping girls out of school, Human Rights Watch found, are the government's under-investment in schools, lack of schools, prohibitive school fees and related costs, corporal punishment, and a failure to enforce compulsory education. Human Rights Watch also found poor quality within both government and low-cost private schools, a lack of government regulation of private schools, and corruption.

In addition to these factors within the education system, girls are also blocked from attending school by external factors including child labor, gender discrimination, child marriage, sexual harassment, insecurity, and attacks on education.

The Pakistan government has consistently invested far less in education than is recommended by international standards. As of 2017, Pakistan was spending less than 2.8 percent of its gross domestic product on education – far below the recommended 4 to 6 percent – leaving the government's education system severely under-funded. Government schools are in such short supply that even in Pakistan's major cities, many children cannot reach a school on foot safely in a reasonable amount of time. The situation is far worse in rural areas. And there are many more schools for boys than for girls.

Aisha, around age 30, lives with her husband and their six children in an area of Peshawar where the nearest government school for boys, offering nursery school through 10th grade, is less than a five-minute walk away. The nearest government school for girls is a 30-minute walk and goes only through fifth grade. Aisha's daughter left school when she was 9 because of her parents' concerns about her safety walking to school.

"Even parents who are not educated themselves understand that their daughters' future depends on them going to school, but the government is abandoning these families," Gertholtz said. "Pakistan's future depends on educating its children, including its girls."

An “upward bottleneck” exists as children, especially girls, get older. Secondary schools are in shorter supply than primary schools, and colleges have even less capacity, especially for girls. Many girls who complete the top level at one school cannot access a school where they could go on to the next level. In the absence of an adequate system of government schools, there has been a massive growth in the number of private schools, many of them low-cost. But poor families often cannot afford any tuition fees and the government’s near-total failure to regulate and monitor these schools means that many are of poor quality.

Newly-elected Prime Minister Imran Khan’s political party’s manifesto promises major reforms to the education system, including for girls’ education. “We will prioritise establishment and upgradation of girls’ schools and provide stipends to girls and women for continuing their education,” the manifesto says. It pledges to “put in place the most ambitious education agenda in Pakistan’s history, spanning reform of primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational, and special education.”

“The government recognizes that education reform is desperately needed and promises to make this a priority, especially for girls – a positive step,” Gerntholtz said. “We hope that our findings will help the government to diagnose the problems and identify solutions that will give every Pakistani girl a bright future.”

Selected Quotes from People Interviewed

Lack of investment and shortage of government schools

“I could send them if there was a government school.”

—Akifah, 28, mother of three children, ages 10, 8, and 7. The family moved from a village near Multan to Karachi three years earlier, looking for work, and had no choice but to settle in an area where there were only private schools the family cannot afford, and no government schools within reach.

“My parents said, ‘If you are interested enough you can walk there.’ Whoever wanted to, went. I found it too far. The path is lonely and isolated and there have been cases of two or three kidnappings in that area... But then I realized I needed to study so I convinced my parents and I got friends to go so we walked to school together.”

—Asifa, 20, in Punjab, who delayed attending school until she was 9 or 10 because it was a 45-minute walk from her village. The school only went through eighth grade, so after that she went to live with her sister in a town where grades nine and ten were available.

“The state has never taken education seriously—proper resources have never been allocated in any state. The problem is the priorities of government—education is not a priority and they don’t allocate the budget.”

—Head of a nongovernmental organization working on women’s rights, Punjab.

“[E]very mother wants their child to be educated, but there is not a state system to deliver the services.”

—Head of a community-based organization, Karachi.

Gender discrimination in the government’s provision of schools

“If you have 10 schools for boys, you have 5 for girls.”

—An education expert from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Poverty and the cost of education

"The government doesn't help the poor. We can't educate our children, and we can't feed ourselves."

—Rukhsana, 30, mother of three out-of-school children, whose husband is rarely able to work due to illness, who was unable to pay for school fees and related costs, Karachi.

"The school may be free, but there are always demands for money for something or the other. Copies, stationery, every day there is a new expense. A school bag alone costs 500 rupees [US\$4.76].... Every day, every day, it's something."

—Zarifah, a mother of five out-of-school children, Balochistan.

"I wanted my daughters to get educated, but I couldn't because of poverty. My husband's salary is 12,000 rupees [\$114] a month. At the end of the month, we are always out [of money] and wonder what to do – it is all gone. I want a school for girls who belong to poor families."

—Halima, 38, in Karachi, mother of five daughters, ages 13 to 19, none of whom studied more than a year or two. Her husband works in a chewing gum factory.

Quality concerns and corruption

"A lot of times the teacher showed up late or he would not show up at all. We would just go and sit and then come home."

—Hakimah, 17, Karachi, describing her primary school.

"For the last five years, everyone has to pay [to obtain a government teaching position]. It's worth it just for the salary – it's an investment. This has an impact on the quality of the teaching – there's no teaching."

—Director of a community-based organization, Karachi.

"Once or twice a year they [inspectors] come, unannounced. They come for a half hour. They want tea and to be entertained. You have to please them or they will say that your school is not good. Once I made the inspector wait and he got mad and left and said, 'I will write a bad report.' My colleague went to his house and gave him 25,000 rupees [\$238] and we got a good report."

—Private school principal, describing government monitoring of the school, Punjab.

Two killed in alleged honor killing incident in Karachi

Dunya News (09.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2p2NC5s> - KARACHI (Dunay News) – At least two dead bodies were found on Sunday, in a house of Federal-B area in Karachi, in another alleged honour killing case.

After information, police and rescue services reached the spot and recovered two corpses with signs of torture on them.

The deceased were identified one as Asmat while other as Umair, SSP central confirmed.

As per details of police, twin murder was committed by the husband of the woman, Sabir who fled the area after committing crime.

Police had shifted the bodies to Abbasi Shaheed Hospital for postmortem while further investigation is underway.

Bridging Pakistan's gender divide

By Samina Ahmed

International Crisis Group (07.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2heaFWY> - "Our people won't let a girl study beyond the third grade (eight or nine years old). But this girl here cries and says: 'I want to learn'. And I love her so much that I have no choice but to send her away from our village, because no education is available here beyond primary school level. She will go to the big city and she will learn and be the first one in the family".

I hear these words from a Pakistani father about his daughter back in the early 2000s, on my second research assignment for the International Crisis Group. I am travelling in Balochistan, an area affected by a decade-old insurgency. I am seeking to unpack the causes of militancy and conflict through meetings with former militants, political workers, rights activists and religious leaders.

The eagerness of a little girl to defy the odds against her studying still resonates for me, as does her father's sympathetic support, despite all the obstacles of tradition. They epitomise countless testimonies I hear throughout my travels. Not only do they influence how I work, but they guide my understanding of Pakistan and of how people – especially but not only women and children – experience its violence and multiple conflicts.

Unheard Voices, Invisible Forces

On this pivotal day for me in Balochistan, a region tucked up against Iran and Afghanistan, I am planning to meet liberal, secular political activists, opponents of the Islamist Taliban. The meeting at this house, sitting cross-legged on the floor are only men, with one exception: a little girl. Responding to my questions, her father explains her determination to go to school and praises her character and tenacity to fulfil her dream.

He then proposes that I speak to other women from their community to hear their perspectives and experiences of the situation in the province. Such an opportunity in a part of the country where men and women live segregated lives is rare for any outsider. I jump at the chance and am escorted to the part of the house where women of the family live, off-limits to all men barring close relatives.

A large group of women greet me, well-dressed for the occasion. They gather round, excited at the chance to meet an outsider. They start by asking questions. How can a woman do the job I do? How can I work alone? How do I travel long distances freely? Except for family visits once a year, they say, they never venture beyond the walls of their home. They begin sharing their experiences and life stories. Some tell me that they would like to be educated and to have a job. There is anger and frustration in their voices. They know what they want, but believe it beyond their reach.

This meeting has a profound effect on me. I am a longstanding women's rights activist, and was a member of the Women's Action Forum in the 1980s during military rule. Having studied in universities in Pakistan and abroad, and worked in several countries, I am comfortable standing up for myself in a man's world. But experiencing real, well-articulated frustration on both male and female sides of a traditional Pashtun household makes me start to think anew about the gender divide.

I begin to understand the importance of integrating gender power dynamics into my conflict analysis by listening to women and girls in conflict-affected areas, even if they are publicly invisible. I come to realise that being a female researcher is a definite plus, as it gives me access to women as well as men. That day I make a conscious choice: I will redouble efforts to interview women as well as men, understand how they experience violence and their perspective on ending it and harness their potential to help build a more peaceful society.

The Remotest Reaches of Pakistan

In my years at Crisis Group I travel throughout Pakistan, from the slums of its largest city, Karachi, on the Indian Ocean to the hamlets of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa along the border with Afghanistan. I talk to people of all walks of life, especially the unheard and invisible parts of society. These include not just the voices of girls and women, but also those of political party workers, fishermen and farmers struggling for survival in often harsh and inhospitable terrain.

As a female researcher, I face no resistance while at work. The challenges are those faced by every woman travelling in Pakistan. The absence of public toilets for women, for example, poses not just a health but also a security hazard. Overall, though, during my trips, including times when I am the only woman staying in hole-in-the-wall hotels, I find that people are especially anxious to ensure that I am comfortable and safe.

Being a professional, at times people forget that I am a woman. They rarely treat me as an outsider, or a woman not conforming to local norms. The exception is in urban centres where I visit more conservative madrasas or mosques, though even there, people do not stop or openly rebuke me. Only very occasionally does someone ask me to cover my hair, as normally expected of a Muslim woman in Pakistan. Through their demeanour, however, people can convey that they are at least uncomfortable if not hostile to independent women like myself.

Of course I am conscious that not all Pakistani women think like me. This strikes me most forcefully one day on a visit to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. I attend a session of the local parliament, where the ruling Islamist Party has a large number of female parliamentarians. Yet it is the men who talk, while the women simply sit there in silence. "Aren't you going to take part in the debate?", I ask one of the women from the Islamist Party.

"No, my male leaders will talk on my behalf", she retorts.

Providing a public platform to women is sometimes not enough to ensure that they themselves express their views and needs. In some cases, women in public life may also serve as proxies for other interests.

And yet I also see women and girls, like that little girl in the remote household in Balochistan, who want to speak out, who want to learn, who want an education, and whose menfolk are sometimes willing to listen to them.

The Madrasa Paradox

Women are not the whole story, since men are also changing, sometimes almost without being aware of it. I become conscious of this during my research on madrasas, or religious schools, a truly male preserve that I initially do not even connect to women.

I cannot enter madrasas, so a male Crisis Group colleague must talk to male students there. But I can meet the leaders of the religious parties that run much of the madrasa

sector. I approach one Islamist party leader, who runs what is possibly the largest and most extreme group of madrasas, where almost nothing except the strictest interpretation of the Quran is taught. Surprisingly, he invites me to his home. Clearly, he doesn't consider me as a threat as a woman. His young son is even present.

"Well sister", the party leader says, "please tell my son he should study hard".

"*Maulana*, what does the young boy study?" I ask.

"English, mathematics and computer sciences".

"But *Maulana*", I shoot back. "Why isn't he in your madrasa?".

And he replies: "Sister, times have changed".

Giving Women a Chance

In 2005, I travel to Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to get a sense of what is happening in the countryside. A guide, who is an ex-fighter wounded on battlefronts in both Afghanistan and in Kashmir, invites me home to meet his family. His house lies in a small, beautiful mountain village where he lives with his young daughters. His biggest problem: the obstacles he faces in giving these girls a formal education.

"You know", he says, "for me the most precious thing now is their lives. And their futures. But what do I have to offer them? There is no school here. Without that, they can't be ever like you, educated. And that's what I want".

Then the girls cluster round and I speak with them about what they believe the village most urgently needs. Their answer is simple: water, because they have to travel long distances just to get enough water for the house. And education. Through the years, I often hear this refrain.

Schooling comes up again when I try to explain Crisis Group's conflict prevention work to one fifteen-year-old girl in Balochistan's Gwadar city, a major naval base and now the hub of the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor. She responds with frustration and anger.

"You know, we are sick of the UN and you NGOs. You come here, you talk, you preach, you write, over and over again, but you don't do anything for us".

"What you think needs to be done?", I ask.

"Look, I don't want to be a teacher. I want to be a scientist. But in my school, there is not even a science teacher!", she says. "I will never be a scientist unless we have what you had, the privilege of a good education".

I learn my lesson right there. I want to do something about the lack of opportunities offered to her. Pakistani society may seem conservative about women's education, but under the surface, currents for change are building momentum.

My research across Pakistan illustrates the impact that insecurity has on girls' ability to seek an education. Every person interviewed – not just young girls, but also their fathers and brothers – said that if their daughters or sisters could travel without risk to a nearby school, they would send them there. In much of the countryside, however, people often live far from schools; in rough urban districts, the daily trip to school may pose a physical threat. "We can't risk them going long distances. It's too unsafe", is a complaint I hear often. It challenges my previous notion that cultural and social restrictions alone prevent girls from accessing education in Pakistan's conflict zones.

These insights lead me to write two reports on girls' education in Pakistan. The first one, *Pakistan: Reforming the Education Sector*, published in October 2004, warns that Pakistan's deteriorating education system and a curriculum that promotes religious intolerance fails to equip young people with the skills necessary for a modern economy, and, in some cases, creates foot soldiers for jihadist groups.

I return to the subject ten years later, publishing *Education Reform in Pakistan* to show that millions are still out of school, the curriculum remains unreformed, and the education system remains alarmingly impoverished. That report also raises the problem of safe access to schools for girls, as well as the need to change the curriculum to protect against religious extremism and sectarianism.

A Mutual Interdependence

I am humbled again and again by human rights activists, humanitarian aid workers, and women's rights leaders across Pakistan who risk their lives to promote positive changes in the country. By interviewing them and writing about their views, I take their voices to senior decision-makers in Pakistan. A leading champion of women's rights, Pakistan's first woman Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, lauding the recommendations of our reports, told her party leaders that they should be essential reading. Unlike me, though, many of the people I interview are physically threatened and attacked. Yet every time I meet them, they thank me. I always feel it should be the other way around.

The interdependence of my work and theirs is driven home to me one day in Punjab. I meet a lawyer who says he distributes photocopied versions of our reports among the members of his bar council to build consciousness of the legal changes Pakistan needs, especially to open new opportunities for women. I voice my surprise when he adds that he buys the reports ready-bound in a bookshop, even though they are available for free on our website. He sums up the relationship between Crisis Group, with our research and policy advocacy, and dedicated activists. His group is ready to distribute our work this way because, he says: "We have learned as much from these reports as you have learned from us".

In 2016, writing about different layers of criminal, jihadist and ethno-religious violence in Karachi, I take my insights on what is holding schoolgirls back and test how they may apply to society more broadly. I look into gender-based violence where women are regularly subjected to sexual harassment on the streets as they go to work. Like girls trying to gain a formal education, I find that women from poor and marginalised communities in this mega-city, Pakistan's economic hub, have few options to travel safely to their place of work. What women fear most is violence as they travel from their homes to earn a living and support their families.

By incorporating the perspectives of women and girls into my research, amplifying their voices and analysing how they experience the violence endemic to parts of Pakistan, Crisis Group's work aims to provide a richer understanding of violence and conflict in my home country and encourage the government to take meaningful steps to address the simple problem of safety. Every woman who can leave her house each day to school or work represents a step forward.

International Women's Day: Pakistan's 'invisible' female workers celebrate new legal status

Home-based workers in Sindh province, who prop up the country's informal economy, hope their historic victory will mean an end to exploitation.

By Zofeen Ebrahim

The Guardian (08.03.2017) - Zehra Khan has much to celebrate on International Women's Day. It is exactly four months since members of the Home-Based Women Workers Federation (HBWWF) in Sindh province, Pakistan – of which Khan is secretary general – finally received legal recognition.

The province's chief minister, Syed Murad Ali Shah, signed a policy that means the region's estimated 5 million home-based workers – the majority of whom are women – can register as workers and access benefits.

"It was an important day not only for the history of the labour movement in Sindh and Pakistan, but also for south Asia," says Khan, whose federation has more than 4,500 members.

"Once they are legally accepted as workers, they can be registered with the government-run social security institution, [and] be part of [the] workers' welfare board to enjoy benefits like health, education and housing, as well as those offered after retirement," she adds.

Almost 80% of an estimated 12 million Pakistani home-based workers are women. As well as unpaid domestic work, the women often spend up to 10 hours a day making garments, footwear, sports goods, and arts and crafts behind closed doors. Their work is often invisible to the rest of the world, despite having propped up the country's informal economy for so long.

"They are left to negotiate with the middlemen. Many often get deprived of payment or chastised if they demand better wages," says Khan.

The new government policy, however, brings hope that this kind of exploitation will soon come to an end. Once registered as workers, the women will be able to demand a basic level of pay as set out in the Minimum Wages Act of 2015.

Khan and the federation have been lobbying to improve the rights of female workers for years.

The HBWWF, part-funded by the international women's fund Mama Cash, was born out of informal meetings with female home-based workers organised by Khan back in 2001. By 2005, the small group had grown into the federation, empowering women to recognise their valuable contribution to society and the importance of collective bargaining.

The women put pressure on the local government to improve local services, such as fixing the sewage system and having the rubbish collected from their narrow alleys. They asked the water board for a water supply, and demanded that domestic violence be addressed.

Eventually, they began to focus on their own rights as workers and lobbying for the new nationwide policy began.

"We carried out extensive consultations with other labour and trade unions within Pakistan," recalls Khan.

Most of the time was spent sitting in the offices of the parliamentarians and politicians, cajoling them to give a few minutes of their time to read through their policy and understand what they were saying.

"We would wait with bated breath and a sinking feeling as our file got buried under the hundreds of others that needed the chief minister's immediate attention," says Khan.

After the passage of the 18th constitutional amendment in 2010, when provinces were given greater autonomy, Sindh formed a provincial taskforce in 2013 to tweak the national policy and make it more province-specific, and sent it to the chief executive for approval.

"It's neither gender- nor women-focused – our focus is class, and should be seen through the lens of a labour movement," says Khan.

The government of Sindh has indeed taken a historic first step among the four provinces of Pakistan, bringing home-based workers into the legal net.

Pakistan toughens laws on rape and 'honor killings' of women

By Salman Masood

NY Times (06.10.2016) - <http://nyti.ms/2dJzglS> - The Pakistani Parliament on Thursday passed laws to increase sentences for rapists and those who commit so-called honor killings of women, and closed a loophole that allowed many of the killers to go free, after hours of heated opposition from Islamist lawmakers.

Each year, hundreds of Pakistani women are killed by relatives angered by behavior they believe has impugned the family's reputation, according to human rights activists, who have campaigned against the practice and called for tougher laws for years.

Most of those killings have gone without punishment because of a tenet of Islamic law that allows killers to go free if they are forgiven by the woman's family – something that usually happens because the killers are usually family members.

"Under the new law, relatives of the victim would only be able to pardon the killer if he is sentenced to capital punishment," Zahid Hamid, the law minister, said on the floor of the National Assembly. "However, the culprit would still face a mandatory life sentence."

The Parliament was divided in a debate that lasted hours, with particular opposition from Islamist political parties that insisted the bill must be approved by a clerical panel before being passed. That requirement has been a sticking point in past attempts to enact legal protections for women.

This time, the government and supporters of the bill from the opposition benches ruled that step out.

In the other legislation passed on Thursday, Mr. Hamid, the law minister, said that verdicts in rape cases would have to be given within three months, and that sentences would increase.

"We have made it mandatory that the culprit must be imprisoned for 25 years," he said, adding that the rape of minors and the mentally and physically disabled has also become punishable under the law.

"These bills are hugely important for Pakistani women, where rape conviction rates were almost nonexistent, due in large part to various technical obstacles to accessing justice,"

Yasmeen Hassan, the global executive director of the rights group Equality Now, said in a statement. "We hope that these new laws will help generate a cultural shift in Pakistani society and that women will be able to live their lives in safety."

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif hailed the passage of the legislation, saying that there was "no honor in honor killings."

"I congratulate the Parliament, the NGOs, civil society, academia, media and all those who worked hard and supported us in the passage of this legislation," Mr. Sharif said, referring to nongovernmental organizations.

He said his government would ensure enforcement of the legislation.

"I feel so relieved," said Sughra Imam, a former senator, who had originally pushed for legislation against the honor-killing practice. "I hope they will help," Ms. Imam said in an interview, referring to the new laws.

"No law will completely eliminate crime," she said. "But at the very least, it should hold those who violate the law and principles of justice to account."

Pakistan passes marriage bill protecting Hindu women's rights

The Malay Mail Online (27.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2d2XvuG> - Pakistan's lower house of parliament has passed a landmark bill giving its small Hindu minority the right to register marriages, the last major hurdle on the way to enacting a law aimed at protecting women's rights.

Activists say that Hindu women have been disproportionately targeted for abduction, forced conversions and rape because their marriages were never officially recognised and therefore not provable in court.

The National Assembly passed the bill yesterday after 10 months of deliberation. The Senate is expected to pass the law without any significant delay.

Hindus make up approximately 1.6 per cent of Pakistan's Moslem-majority 190 million population, but have not had any legal mechanisms to register their marriages since independence from Britain in 1947.

Christians, the other main religious minority, have a British law dating back to 1870 regulating their marriages.

The new bill sets the minimum age for marriage for Hindus at 18. The minimum legal age for marriage for citizens of other religions is 18 for men and 16 for women.

Breaking the law regarding the minimum age would result in six months' jail and a 5,000-rupee (RM194) fine. Unicef estimates 21 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 in Pakistan were first married before age 18, with 3 per cent married before age 16.

Zohra Yusuf, head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, said the proof of marriage would offer greater protection to Hindu women.

"Once marriages are registered, at least they have certain rights that are ensured," she said.

Widows, in particular, were disadvantaged, she said, being unable to prove marriage to their husbands in order to gain government welfare benefits. The new law legalises remarriage for a widow six months after her husband's death.

It also grants Hindus the right to divorce, with women having the additional right to do so on grounds of negligence, bigamy or having been married before 18.

Activists warn, however, that more needs to be done on the issue of abductions and forced conversions.

"When there is suspicion of a forced marriage, it has to be investigated ... currently members of the Hindu community say that no-one listens to them, not even the courts," said Yusuf.

Who are the Pakistani group proposing to 'lightly beat' women?

A Pakistani group has come under fire for drafting a women's protection bill that suggests a husband can "lightly beat" his wife to keep her in line. What is this body and does it have any real power? The BBC's M Ilyas Khan explains.

BBC (30.05.2016) - <http://bbc.in/1XKuEvt> -

It is called the Council of Islamic Ideology

Created by a military government in 1961, the Council of Islamic ideology (CII) is a 20-member constitutional body that advises the government on religious aspects of the law and society - but its recommendations are not binding.

The constitution says CII members should be "well-qualified". It specifies that the council should have at least two retired judges, four members with a minimum of 15 years of experience in Islamic research and teaching, and that members should have an "understanding of the economic, political, legal or administrative problems of Pakistan".

In practice though, this definition has been stretched to include men from religious pressure groups whose careers have been limited to administering or teaching in religious seminaries where contemporary knowledge is looked down upon.

So many of the CII's proposals have not been taken seriously by leaders.

The proposal to 'lightly beat' women

No stranger to controversy, the CII has faced unprecedented criticism as a result of the draft women's protection bill.

Portions of the draft leaked to the media recommend a husband should be allowed to "lightly" beat his wife if, among other things, she refuses to dress properly or turns down overtures for sexual intercourse.

It also prohibits female nurses from taking care of male patients, and bans the presence of women in receptions held for visiting foreign dignitaries.

Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah rejected the proposals, saying: "Islam does not allow any violence, whether against women or children."

Lawyer and human rights activist Asma Jahangir told Geo TV that the proposals amounted to "the humiliation of women".

The independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan termed the proposals "ridiculous", and recommended the abolition of the CII.

So why did they come up with the recommendations?

The CII proposals were a response to a women's protection law passed by the Punjab government in March.

That law wanted to make it easier for female victims of domestic violence to report abuse, and introduced procedures to keep the perpetrator away from the victim until the dispute was resolved.

The CII was opposed to the law, and declared it un-Islamic.

The Punjab government has delayed enacting the law - even though the CII's rulings are not binding.

The council has been issuing rulings for decades - with mixed results

Pakistan Senator Farhatullah Babar says the group suggested, back in 1978, that the Pakistan flag carry the words "Allahu Akbar" (God is great). But nobody bothered to implement the ruling.

In 1983, the CII ruled that political parties were contrary to the spirit of Islam, and that a presidential system was more Islamic than a parliamentary one.

This suited the ruler at the time, General Zia, who then barred political parties from contesting elections in 1985. However, he stopped short of instituting a presidential system fearing wider political turmoil,

In 1990s, the CII came up with another controversial ruling which successive governments have considered impractical.

They declared monetary interest un-Islamic and suggested that it be replaced with a system of profit-sharing between banks and their depositors, by investing in businesses that are not run on interest-based loans.

The ruling has not affected the banking system in Pakistan in any way except that interest is now called "mark-up" and some banks have set up separate desks of "Islamic banking" to cater to more "pious" depositors.

But it has had some impact when it comes to family and society

But while the CII has not been able to cut much ice with successive governments over matters of politics and finance, it has had more influence in matters concerning family life and social issues.

In these areas, it has had the backing of some religious groups, as well as a sympathetic military. For example, in the mid-1970s, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's secular government was forced to comply with the CII's ruling to ban alcohol after religious groups resorted to street violence in support of the decree.

The CII has also thrown its weight behind groups that have discouraged parliamentarians from amending Pakistan's controversial blasphemy law.

It has also made other 'recommendations' for women

In January, a parliamentary committee dropped proposed legislation to increase the country's minimum marriageable age from 16 to 18, after the CII declared the move un-Islamic.

The council has also been campaigning to lower the marriageable age to 12 and nine for males and females respectively, "provided there are visible signs of puberty".

But successive governments have largely ignored that advice, so the minimum marriageable age in Pakistan has stayed at 16.

Pakistan honour killings on the rise, report reveals

Nearly 1,100 women were killed in Pakistan last year by relatives who believed they had dishonoured their families, the country's independent Human Rights Commission says.

BBC (01.04.2016) - <http://bbc.in/1RDapdd> - In its annual report the commission said 900 more women suffered sexual violence and nearly 800 took, or tried to take, their own lives.

In 2014 about 1,000 women died in honour-related attacks and 869 in 2013.

Correspondents say a large number of such crimes go unreported in Pakistan.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has said there is no place in Islam for killing in the name of family honour.

"The predominant causes of these killings in 2015 were domestic disputes, alleged illicit relations and exercising the right of choice in marriage," the report said.

Most of the 1,096 victims were shot, the report said, but attacks with acid were also common.

Among the cases highlighted in the report are a man who shot dead his two sisters in Sargodha, Punjab, because he believed they had "bad character" and three teenage girls killed by their male cousin for "dishonouring" their family in Pakpattan, Punjab.

The report said that 88 men were also the victims of honour killings last year.

In February, Punjab, the country's largest province, passed a landmark law criminalising all forms of violence against women.

However, more than 30 religious groups, including all the mainstream Islamic political parties, have threatened to launch protests if the law is not repealed.

Religious groups have equated women's rights campaigns with promotion of obscenity. They say the new Punjab law will increase the divorce rate and destroy the country's traditional family system.

Among the most infamous cases of honour killing in Pakistan was the stoning to death of Farzana Parveen in 2014 outside the High Court in Lahore. She had married against her family's wishes.

Her father, brother, cousin and former fiance were all found guilty of murder. Another brother received a 10-year jail sentence.

The issue of honour killings in Pakistan inspired a documentary film, *A Girl in the River - The Price of Forgiveness*, which won its creator, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, an Oscar at this year's Academy Awards.

In her acceptance speech, she said it was after seeing the film that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had vowed to change the law on honour killings.

Top Punjab religious body rules that The Women's Protection Law is "un-Islamic"

Reuters (03.03.2016)- <http://reut.rs/1RseXCF> - A powerful Pakistani religious body that advises the government on the compatibility of laws with Islam on Thursday declared a new law that criminalizes violence against women to be "un-Islamic."

The Women's Protection Act, passed by Pakistan's largest province of Punjab last week, gives unprecedented legal protection to women from domestic, psychological and sexual violence. It also calls for the creation of a toll-free abuse reporting hot line and the establishment of women's shelters.

But since its passage in the Punjab assembly, many conservative clerics and religious leaders have denounced the new law as being in conflict with the Muslim holy book, the Koran, as well as Pakistan's constitution.

"The whole law is wrong," Muhammad Khan Sherani, the head of the Council of Islamic Ideology said at a news conference, citing verses from the Koran to point out that the law was "un-Islamic."

The 54-year-old council is known for its controversial decisions. In the past it has ruled that DNA cannot be used as primary evidence in rape cases, and it supported a law that requires women alleging rape to get four male witnesses to testify in court before a case is heard.

The council's decision this January to block a bill to impose harsher penalties for marrying off girls as young as eight or nine has angered human rights activists.

The new law establishes district-level panels to investigate reports of abuse, and mandates the use of GPS bracelets to keep track of offenders.

It also sets punishments of up to a year in jail for violators of court orders related to domestic violence, with that period rising to two years for repeat offenders.

Fazlur Rehman, the chief of one of Pakistan's largest religious parties, the Jamiat-i-Ulema Islam, said the law was in conflict with both Islam and the constitution of Pakistan.

"This law makes a man insecure," he told journalists. "This law is an attempt to make Pakistan a Western colony again."

In 2013, more than 5,800 cases of violence against women were reported in Punjab alone, the province where Wednesday's law was passed, according to the Aurat Foundation, a women's rights advocacy group.

Those cases represented 74 percent of the national total that year, the latest for which data is available.

Christian women in Pakistan forcibly converted to Islam and married off to their kidnappers

Tahira, 21, and Reema Bibi, 20, were abducted near their home last December. The Muslim men who took them, raped them and forcibly married them, and then kept them segregated. At least 1,000 Christian women are forcibly converted in Pakistan each year. If they escape, the police arrests a family member.

AsiaNews.it (26.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ROP16Q> - Tahira, 21, and Reema Bibi, 20, are two Pakistani Christian women who were abducted on 2 December 2015 from near their home in Sargodha (Punjab) as they returned together from work.

The two Muslim men who took the two young women, raped them, and then forcibly married them. Afterwards, they kept them segregated in their Islamabad home, this according to British Pakistani Christian Association (BPCA), an activist group that works for religious freedom in Pakistan, and monitors the continuous violations against minorities, especially women, which the government does not punish.

Forced marriages have been a scourge in the Muslim nation for years, one that does not seem close to any resolution. The case of Tahira and Reema is emblematic. On 11 February, Tahira managed to escape, but her Muslim "husband" filed a complaint with police, who immediately arrested six members of her family. The relatives were released thanks to pressure from human rights groups, but the authorities have ordered the family to return Tahira to her "husband."

The BPCA reported a similar case a few days ago. A Christian woman was seized and forced to marry the Muslim owner of the house where she worked as a cleaner. After she managed to escape thanks to a colleague, the police ordered her family to hand her over to the authorities; otherwise, they would arrest a relative.

According to a report by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan, at least 1,000 Pakistani women and girls are forced into Muslim marriages and made to convert to Islam each year. However, the real number is certainly much higher, since many incidents go unreported.

The aforementioned report found that forced marriages usually follow a similar pattern: females between the ages of 12 and 25 are abducted, made to convert to Islam, and then married to the abductor or an associate.

Even if a case goes to court, the victims are threatened and pressured by their "husband" and his family to declare that their conversion was voluntary.

Victims are often sexually abused, forced into prostitution, and suffer domestic abuse or even wind up in the human trafficking racket. Those who try to rebel are told that they "are now Muslims and that the punishment for apostasy is death".

In November 2015, the Pakistani Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Council of Islamic Ideology opposed a law on "forced conversion", sparking dismay and protests among Pakistani Hindus and Christians.

Since most minority Pakistanis are very poor, it is hard for them to have adequate political representation and receive justice.

That of forced marriages is just one of many issues that religious and ethnic minorities face as they are deprived of their rights, even though they are formally guaranteed by the Constitution.

A landmark Supreme Court ruling on 19 June 2014 took note of the injustice meted out to the country's minorities.

Headed by Chief Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani, the bench included justices Azmat Saeed and Mushir Alam. It found that the government is complicitous in the acts of injustice. Unfortunately, the court's ruling did not spark any reaction from the government.

In the latest case, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has called for the return of Tahira and Reema to their families and criminal proceedings against their captors and rapists. Established in 1994, the AHRC is based in Hong Kong.

Bill banning child marriage fails in Pakistan after it's deemed 'un-Islamic'

The Washington Post (15.01.2016) - <http://wapo.st/1Sf3QmP> - Pakistani lawmakers had to withdraw a bill aimed at curbing the practice of child marriage after a prominent religious body declared the legislation un-Islamic.

The bill, which proposed raising the marriage age for females from 16 to 18, also called for harsher penalties for those who would arrange marriages involving children. Despite the laws in place, child marriages, particularly involving young female brides, are common in parts of the country. It's estimated that some 20 percent of girls in the country are married before they turn 18.

But the Council of Islamic Ideology, a constitutional body which gives advice to parliament on the compatibility of laws with Sharia, appeared to slap down the legislation after deeming it "un-Islamic" and "blasphemous," according to Agence France Presse. It had already handed down a similar ruling in 2014.

The council has garnered opprobrium in the past. In 2013, reports AFP, "it suggested making DNA inadmissible evidence in rape cases, instead calling for the revival of an Islamic law that makes it mandatory for a survivor to provide four witnesses to back their claims."

Girls Not Brides, an international coalition of civil society organizations working against child marriage, cited this religious body as an obstacle toward reform. A number of provinces in Pakistan have pushed for legislation cracking down on child marriages, but implementing the law is more difficult.

Clerics on the council object to minimum age requirements, arguing instead that an individual can marry once reaching puberty, which can be as early as the age of 9.