

Rape Victim Hero of Women's' Rights!

"Changing Culture in Pakistani Village"

Mukhtar Mai is a shy Pakistani woman with such extraordinary courage that she was named Glamour's Woman of the Year, one of Asia's Heroes by Time, and was honored by the United Nations. Most importantly, her unprecedented action after being raped by a gang of men in her village to settle a score against her brother, has led to the transformation of the culture of justice and education for her entire village.

In 2002, a tribal council in rural Meerwala ordered the rape of Mai as a solution to "restoring the family's honor" after her brother was accused of being with a girl from a rival tribe. Instead of being cowed by traditional strictures under which she was expected to commit suicide out of shame, Ms. Mukhtar, with the support of her father and family, her Imam, and some journalists, decided to press charges. In a society where the vast majority of rapes go unpunished, Mai took the unusual course of fighting her case all the way to the nation's highest court

and, in a decision that rocked Pakistan, the perpetrators were found guilty.

After receiving an award from the Pakistani Government of 500,000 rupees, Ms. Mukhtar, instead of fleeing, returned to the village in which she had experienced such pain to establish a school that now educates 300 girls and 200 boys, along with a crisis center that advises women and girls threatened by childhood marriage and other practices.

For her audience at the UN, the soft-spoken woman explained through an interpreter why educating children was important in the fight for woman's rights. "When I was pursuing justice, the uneducated people tried to stop me and the educated people supported me. So I realized education was crucial,"

"My slogan is: 'End oppression with education,'" she added, noting that after her efforts in her rural village, attitudes there have changed quite dramatically.

Under-Secretary-General Tharoor, a native of India, recognized the scale of that accomplishment: "As someone who comes

from a country that has also struggled to find ways to end the often brutal practices of our traditional pasts, I can assure you that the obstacles that Ms. Mukhtar Mai and her fellow Pakistanis face are not small, and that hers is no small achievement," he said. "I think it is fair to say that anyone who has the moral courage and internal strength to turn such a brutal attack into a weapon to defend others in a similar position is a hero indeed.

In October, Glamour magazine awarded Mai a check for \$20,000, and readers of a New York Times article in 2005 were so moved they sent nearly \$100,000. Mai said she'd donate money to help the female victim's of Pakistan's recent earthquake and the rest would be used to set up a hotline and shelter for women in Pakistan who want to escape abusive relationships or to recover from the trauma of rape.

She aired a message on CNN to all the women of the world who have been raped or brutalized in any way: "No matter what, they must talk about it and they must fight for justice."

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Weis-Corbley is the author of more than 300 good news stories and essays. This article, along with a photo of Mai, was originally published in the Inspiration category of the Good News Network on May 12 and is Copyrighted © 2006.

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