

Pakistan: Where gang rapists walk free

All but one of 14 men accused of arranging and executing the rape of a village woman were acquitted by Pakistan's Supreme Court.

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This is “a black day in Pakistan’s history,” said Raza Rumi in the Karachi *Express Tribune*. The Supreme Court has acquitted all but one of 14 men accused of arranging and executing the rape of Mukhtaran Mai. In 2002, Mai’s 12-year-old brother was sodomized by several men from a powerful caste. To prevent his family from seeking justice, the men accused the boy of adultery with a woman from their clan. A local *jirga* was convened, which saw the events as the powerful caste wished it to. In order to punish Mai’s family for a nonexistent act of dishonor, the *jirga* ordered Mai to be raped by four men from that clan while the *jirga* elders looked on. Such hideous perversions of justice, common in rural Pakistan, are usually ignored by the police. Fortunately for Mai, her village imam was outraged and went to the press. “Thanks to the media frenzy, the state had to act.” A state court tried 14 men and sentenced six of them to death. But the Lahore High Court overturned that verdict in 2005, and last week the Supreme Court agreed. Now, only one man will serve a prison term.

Rural Pakistan is a deeply misogynistic place, said Murtaza Razvi in the Karachi *Dawn*. Village councils are made up of “uneducated men whose minds are steeped deep in the dark recesses of tribal, feudal rules and laws of their own making.” These men run their own justice system, entirely untethered from our constitutional law. They favor the powerful clans, and they treat women as lower than animals. “Girl children are sold in marriages to older men; women are traded off in forced marriages to settle tribal feuds; and yet others are killed, even buried or burned alive in the name of so-called honor.” But it wasn’t just rural Pakistan that failed Mai. The laws that the Supreme Court relies on to rule in such cases are primitive and sexist. The law of evidence, for example, “considers one woman’s testimony as being equal to half that of a man’s in the case of rape.”

The court was hampered by the lack of evidence, said the Lahore *Daily Times* in an editorial. The semen recovered from Mai’s body and clothes matched only two of the men. The police report was extremely thin and lacked many of the necessary documents. Of course, that was because the police “were influenced by the powerful locals who committed this crime.” The problem, then, lies not with the Supreme Court but with “the entrenched bias against women in the entire justice system.”

“There is a silver lining to Mukhtaran Mai’s grim story,” said the Islamabad *News*. This brave woman fought back against her abusers and exposed the barbaric practices of *jirga* justice to the whole world. “Her story is inspirational.” And her courage “is a slap in the face for all those who wronged her.”