

Malala's Forgotten Sisters



KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA, Pakistan — At only 12, Nazia lives in expectation of the worst. As I step through the doorway of the humble compound her parents share with two other families in the Pashtun lands of northwest Pakistan, her small, fragile body trembles unwittingly. She knew I was coming, but learned too young to trust no one.

Nazia was only 5 when her father married her off to a much older man, a stranger, as compensation for a murder her uncle had committed. The decision to give the little girl away as payment, along with two goats and a piece of land, was made by a *jirga* -- an

assembly of local elders that makes up the justice system in most of Pakistan's and Afghanistan's tribal areas, where conventional courts are either not trusted or nonexistent. "One night a man came and took me by the hand," Nazia says, in a nearly inaudible moan.

Nazia was too young to understand what was happening when that man dragged her into the darkness. But born in a land where women are not to be seen by strangers, she knew enough to realize something was terribly wrong. "I resisted, I cried, and tried to hold on to the doorjamb," she remembers.

Nazia was taken to the jirga, displayed as a commodity before the circle of men, and examined by the husband to be, who was allowed to decide whether she was good enough to be his wife. Nazia remembers the men staring at her deep brown eyes, her long, black hair -- the humiliation of that scene is so utterly marked in her memory that she can barely finish the sentence before dissolving in tears.

The men in her family argued, unsuccessfully, that she was too young to be married off. In a rare decision, however, the jirga did agree that the girl should not be handed over immediately. So the demanding husband would have to wait -- and so has Nazia. Even among the women in the house, she wears a full-length black chador, as if a male intruder could suddenly enter that door again. I ask whether she knows how pretty she is, but that only makes things worse. Nazia is afraid of being beautiful, for that implies being desired by that man.

She is terrified of growing up. Her parents have been able to postpone their daughter's fate -- but not for much longer, certainly no later than age 14. Most child brides are pregnant by then.

There is an aggravating factor in the fate of girls such as Nazia. Given away as compensation to resolve tribal disputes -- a custom

known as *swara* in Pashtun -- the girls will always represent the enemy for the "dishonored" family, a symbol of their disgrace.

According to tradition, the compensation should end the dispute and bring the two warring families together in harmony. In practice, however, the marriage only provides cover for revenge. Swara girls [become the targets](#) of all anger and hatred in their new home. They are often bitten, emotionally tortured, and sometimes raped by other men in the family. They are made to suffer for a crime they did not commit.

The swara custom is a form of collective punishment that persists in the tribal areas. Nazia's uncle -- the perpetrator of the crime for which she is to be punished -- killed a neighbor in a land dispute and then ran away. He left no children, so the jirga decided his older brother should pay in his place by sacrificing his own daughter.

Nazia's father is a poor, uneducated farmer, and he could do nothing to contest this ruling. Having lost his land and livestock in the dispute, he now works in temporary construction jobs, which pay \$3 a day. His wife helps by cleaning neighbors' houses for a few more rupees.

Nazia's parents have decided this year will be her last year at school. The family has no money to pay for her books, and the expense seemed pointless for them anyway, given that she will soon be married. Nazia herself has lost interest in studying. Since her classmates found out about her fate, she runs back and forth from school, speaking to no one. "They point at me on the streets and call me 'the swara girl,' and they make fun of me," Nazia mumbles. Dogs bark in the distance, making it almost impossible to hear her.

Eventually she blurts out: "That was very painful, and I didn't

understand.... It still hurts and upsets me. I'm so fed up with this feeling! I'm so afraid all the time! I'd rather never leave the house.... People scare me, all people. I trust no one."

The call for prayer echoes off the mud walls, heralding the day's end. For security reasons, we have to leave before dusk. As we move away, Nazia remains motionless -- head huddled against her chest, eyes on the ground, her pale face immersed in sadness. Every sunset brings her closer to the day that the old man will come and take her away for good.

One girl every three seconds

Despite being illegal, the custom of forcibly marrying girls off to resolve family and tribal disputes happens on an alarming scale across all provinces of Pakistan. It goes by different names -- *swara* in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (formerly the North-West Frontier Province) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, *vani* in Punjab, *lajai* in Baluchistan, and *sang chati* in Sindh -- but all its forms are equally cruel.

In Pakistan, at least 180 cases of *swara* were reported last year -- every other day -- thanks to the work of local journalists and activists. But there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of undocumented cases. Worldwide, an estimated [51 million girls](#) below age 18 are married, according to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW).

A further 10 million underage girls marry every year -- one every three seconds, according to ICRW. The legal age to marry in Pakistan is 18 for boys but 16 for girls, though they can't drive, vote, or open a bank account until adulthood. According to UNICEF, 70 percent of girls in Pakistan [are married](#) before then.

Mohammad Ayub, a British-trained psychiatrist from Lahore, has worked with child soldiers in Sudan and young Taliban recruits in

Afghanistan and Pakistan. He now manages the Saidu Sharif Teaching Hospital in the Swat Valley, an area that came under the spotlight when terrorists attempted to kill 15-year-old Malala Yousafzai because of her struggle to promote girls' education. "I saw small children holding guns bigger than themselves," he says. "But these girls.... It's just as tragic."

Many child brides come to Ayub with severe pain, sometimes blinded or paralyzed -- the effects of a psychiatric condition known as "[conversion disorder](#)." Practically unknown in the West since the beginning of the 20th century, it has reached epidemic proportions in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, according to Ayub. It is a sort of psychological stress that manifests in physical ailments, including convulsions, paralysis, or fits.

"Here women don't have a voice, particularly girls," Ayub says. "She can't say, 'No, I don't want this marriage' ... so she keeps it all inside, and eventually it will come out in the form of some physical distress. We receive loads of women here, three to four cases with the same symptoms every day only in my clinic, and I mean daily! Thirteen-, 14-year-old girls, all married."