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MICHAEL WILLIAMSON — THE WASHINGTON POST

A Woman's World

The struggle for equality around the globe

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A Woman's World



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A Mother's Final Look at Life

In Impoverished Sierra Leone, Childbirth Carries Deadly Odds



Jemelleh Saccoh gets a glimpse of her new son. A short time later, she had died of complications — the fate of 1 in 8 women during childbirth in Sierra Leone.

Story by KEVIN SULLIVAN | *Photos by* CAROL GUZY

FREETOWN, Sierra Leone — Fatmata Jalloh's body lay on a rusting metal gurney in a damp hospital ward, a scrap of paper with her name and "R.I.P." taped to her stomach. In the soft light of a single candle — the power was out again in one of Africa's poorest cities — Jalloh looked like a sleeping teenager. Dead just 15 minutes, the 18-year-old's face was round and serene, with freckles around her closed eyes and her full lips frozen in a sad pucker.

Her bare feet stuck out from the colorful cloths in which she had been wrapped by the maternity nurses who had tried to save her life. Her toenails bore the chipped remnants of cheery red polish.

In the dark hallway, her sisters and friends hugged and wailed, “Fatmata! Fatmata!” in a tearful song of grief.

Eight hours earlier, Jalloh delivered her first child: a healthy baby boy. Her official cause of death was postpartum hemorrhaging. She bled to death giving birth in a part of the world where every pregnancy is a gamble.

More than 500,000 women a year — about one every minute — die in childbirth across the globe, almost exclusively in the developing world, and almost always from causes preventable with basic medical care. The planet's worst rates are in this startlingly poor nation on West Africa's Atlantic coast, where a decade of civil war that ended in 2002 deepened chronic deprivation.

According to the United Nations, a woman's chance of dying in childbirth in the United States is 1 in 4,800. In Ireland, which has the best rate in the world, it is 1 in 48,000. In Sierra Leone, it is 1 in 8.

Maternal mortality rarely gets atten-



Isatu Saccloh cradles her niece Jemelleh Saccloh, 35, suffering from pregnancy complications, during the race to the Princess Christian hospital in Freetown.

tion from international donors, who are far more focused on global health threats such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV-AIDS. “Maternal death is an almost invisible death,” said Thoraya A. Obaid, executive director of the U.N. Population Fund.

The women die from bleeding, infection, obstructed labor and preeclampsia, or pregnancy-induced high blood

pressure. But often the underlying cause is simply life in poor countries: Governments don't provide enough decent hospitals or doctors; families can't afford medications.

A lack of education and horrible roads cause women to make unwise

health choices, so that they often prefer the dirt floor of home to deliveries at the hands of a qualified stranger at a distant hospital.

Women die in childbirth every day, according to people who study the issue, because of cultures and traditions that place more worth on the lives of men. "It really reflects the way women are not valued in many societies," said Betsy McCallon of the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood, one of the few groups that advocates to reduce deaths in childbirth. "But there is not that sense of demand that this is unacceptable, so it continues to happen."

Saidu Jalloh said he and Fatmata had been excited about their first baby.

Saidu, 27, a Freetown grocery vendor, said that after marrying a year ago, the couple rented a room in a house in the city's Brima Lane neighborhood. Fatmata had grown up nearby, in a cluster of small shacks shared by more than 25 relatives. Like many African men, her father is a polygamist, with three wives. Fatmata was the eldest child of her mother and the fourth-oldest of her father's 16 children.

Fatmata, who never attended school, was popular, a lighthearted presence with hair worn in tight cornrows and a



BY GENE THORP — THE WASHINGTON POST

bright sense of humor. “She was a very jovial person,” Saidu recalled. “She never quarreled with anyone.”

About 8 p.m. on a recent Thursday, Fatmata started complaining of back pain. Her sister, Batuli Jalloh, knew the baby was due any day, but the two women weren’t sure if the pains were the first signs of labor or just aches from a recent fall Fatmata had taken.

Batuli said they decided to be safe and get it checked out. They thought about going to the Wellington Health

Center, a large government-run clinic where Fatmata was registered for pre-natal care.

But the clinic was about a 30-minute walk away, tough for a nine-months pregnant woman. And taxis are almost impossible to find after dark in their neighborhood, a muddy collection of shacks on a hill overlooking downtown.

A neighbor suggested they go instead to see Elizabeth Cole, a neighborhood nurse who lived just down the road. Batuli said going to her house seemed



Bintu Kamara, 28, lies in the labor ward of Princess Christian Maternity Hospital in Freetown. She survived an emergency C-section, but her child was stillborn.



Relatives try to ease the discomfort of Adama Sannoh, 28, at the Princess Christian hospital in Freetown. She was brought there with convulsions and preeclampsia — pregnancy induced high blood pressure. Magnesium sulfate was administered, but nurses could not bring her out of her coma. As Sannoh lay dying, her mother, Saffie Kallon, prayed and tightly held her daughter's hand. Kallon and her husband work at a health clinic that faces privations like the hospital's.

easier than walking all the way to the clinic.

The sisters walked in the darkness down the street, which, like much of the capital, is lighted at night by a few oil lamps casting an orange glow in darkened doorways. They passed dirt-floor tin shacks where, during the day, people sell cellphone cards, peppers and tomatoes, and meat crawling with flies.

About 10:30 p.m., they arrived at the muddy alley to Cole's one-story, concrete house. Cole led Fatmata into her birthing room, a tiny cubicle with a sagging cot covered with yellow, heavy plastic sheeting.

Fatmata lay down next to a white wall filthy from age and dirt, in a stuffy and hot room where Cole said she has delivered at least 300 babies. The house

has no running water. By Cole's account, Fatmata was far into labor when she arrived: "She almost delivered on her way in the door."

There was no time or transportation to take Fatmata to the clinic or to the larger Princess Christian Maternity Hospital, Cole said later. So she delivered the baby herself, and Fatmata's son was born, without apparent problems, at 11:35.

Fatmata's husband, Saidu, was summoned, and he had a cup of tea with his wife while they held their new baby. Then he went home, and Fatmata fell asleep on the birthing cot, with her sister Batuli sleeping nearby.

At 4 a.m., Batuli said, Fatmata woke with severe abdominal pains and was bleeding heavily. Cole said she tried to stop the flow, but she had no medication or equipment to stanch the hemorrhaging. She gave Fatmata a cup of tea.

"I don't do complications here," Cole said.

They sent for Saidu, who ran frantically around the neighborhood, trying to wake up someone with a car. He found a driver, and Fatmata walked herself out of the room, across the muddy courtyard in the rain and into the car.

They sped off on the 20-minute dash



Isha Koroma, 20, above, waited two days for drugs to induce delivery of her dead infant as two women in labor died nearby. Top, stillborns awaiting burial.

to the Princess Christian hospital. Fatmata was talking in the taxi, complaining that she felt dizzy and weak, and saying over and over, "I think I'm going to die."

They arrived at 6:06 a.m. Nurses wheeled an old iron gurney down to the car and lifted Fatmata onto it. They pushed her quickly up a long ramp to the hospital's main maternity ward on

the second floor, where four nurses went to work on her.

Although she had been talking a few minutes earlier, Fatmata was now unconscious and gasping weakly for air. She had no pulse or blood pressure.

The Princess Christian hospital is a sprawling, low structure that sits between one of the city's busiest market

streets and a slum astride the Atlantic shorefront. It has no air conditioning, a broken light in the operating room, bathrooms with an overpowering stench and virtually no medical supplies.

It is the country's best maternity hospital, handling emergencies and complicated cases referred to it from all over the country.



Adama Sannoh's relatives mourn the loss of the 28-year-old mother. Saffie Kallon, Sannoh's mother, whispered tearful words of farewell to her eldest daughter, saying, "Oh, my darling, goodbye." Thoraya A. Obaid of the U.N. Population Fund calls maternal deaths "almost invisible." The underlying cause often is simply life in poor countries: Governments don't provide enough decent hospitals or doctors, and families can't afford medications.

"We are the last resort; if we fail, there is nowhere else," said Ibrahim D. Thorlie, one of only two specialists in obstetrics and gynecology and director of the 130-bed hospital. He carries a battery-powered desk lamp with him into surgery, in case of power failures.

S.K. Sidique, the other obstetrician on staff, said he had spent almost \$250 out of his own pocket this month for sutures, because the hospital has none.

Before a Caesarean section or other surgeries can start, the patient's family must hurry out and buy medications, intravenous fluids and bags, catheters, blood for transfusions and surgical gloves for the doctors and nurses.

"Everything you see here, the patient has to buy," said Sidique, who had to delay a C-section for 15 minutes one recent day while the patient's husband ran out to buy the gloves.

Because the hospital handles the most difficult cases, its mortality rate is dismal. Last year, there were about 1,230 births at the hospital, and the mother died in 141 of those cases.

During one recent 48-hour period at the hospital, six women died and five babies were stillborn. Two of the women bled to death, and the others died from high blood pressure, infection, complica-

tions from HIV and a botched illegal abortion. All the women whose infants were stillborn had first gone to local nurses or semiskilled "traditional birth attendants" for care, then came to the hospital when they developed complications.

The hospital's main maternity ward is a small beige room with half a dozen small examining rooms behind floral curtains. The examining tables are tattered and stained, and insects and rain fly in the open windows.

One recent day, the corpses of three stillborn babies, wrapped in their mothers' clothes, lay on a table for hours waiting to be buried. An overhead fan pushed the hot air around weakly, carrying whiffs of urine and the unmistakable odor of death, which leaves a bitter taste in the back of the throat.

"Do you see what we are facing here?" Sidique said. "For us, this is something that is normal."

The nurses trying to save Fatmata's life realized she was severely anemic and had lost too much blood. Saidu told them she had not been taking her prenatal vitamins, and she had also been fasting during the day for three weeks in observance of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

The nurses sent Saidu down to the

hospital's one-fridge blood bank. Since the fridge was empty as usual, blood bank workers bought a pint of type O-positive from a black marketeer on the street. They quickly screened it for HIV and other diseases, then sold it to Saidu.

Because the hospital has so few supplies, patients are required to pay for all their medications and blood — and surgery. That can add up to \$200 to \$300, which is several months' wages for many. Local nurses with slim qualifications charge much less.

The maternity ward nurses hung the blood bag and pushed an IV needle into Fatmata's wrist. Head nurse Hawa Fofanah recalled that the blood dripped into the plastic tube, but Fatmata's body didn't absorb it; her heart had stopped pumping.

By candlelight, with a hot, slashing rain dripping in the open window, Fofanah tried chest compressions to revive the dying teenager.

But at 7:14 a.m., Fofanah pronounced Fatmata dead.



The body of Fatmata Jalloh, 18, lies on a gurney eight hours after she delivered her first child and then bled to death. Her father, Abdulai Jalloh, weeps as he views her shrouded body.

Fofanah, who had been working all night, shook her head afterward in weary frustration.

"If she had come here sooner, she would have lived," she said.

An hour after Fatmata died, nurses wrapped her in brightly colored cloths. They had been her clothes when she arrived; now they were her shroud.

They loaded her body onto a black stretcher, and several men carried it to the parking lot.

The hospital's ambulance was broken down, so the family flagged down a small delivery van. They loaded Fatmata's body into the truck's covered bed, pushing aside a spare tire.

Then six of Fatmata's relatives and friends squeezed in with her body, and the truck pulled out into the chaotic morning traffic in the pouring rain, its yellow emergency lights flashing.

Twenty minutes later they arrived at Fatmata's family home, a collection of small shacks around a concrete courtyard. They sat behind the ruined remains of the family's former house, a grander structure that was burned by rebels in the 1990s during the civil war.

A dozen women waited near the rusting iron gate. Over and over they screamed, "Fatmata! Fatmata!" as men



A MOTHER'S RISK: Go inside the "Hospitals of Last Resort" in Sierra Leone and experience the stories of two women during the delivery of their children. Also, find contact information for groups working to improve the problem. Log onto <http://www.washingtonpost.com/womansworld>.

carried her body past an ancient truck up on blocks, past the dogs and chickens in the courtyard and into a small bathroom where her body was unwrapped and washed.

Fatmata's father, a tall and regal-looking man in a long blue robe and a white skullcap, sat with his head in his hands, taking fast and shallow breaths. Fatmata's mother was stuck at least eight hours' drive away in the countryside, caring for her own sick mother.

For the next seven hours, at least 100 people flooded into the courtyard. Many women knelt before Fatmata's father and cried as he consoled them with a gentle touch on the head.

Isata Barrie, 32 and heavily pregnant with her fifth child, sat with dozens of other people on plastic chairs. She said the death of another teenager in childbirth was not a surprise: "This is what happens to women here."

Just before 4 p.m., Saidu and several other men lifted Fatmata's body, now wrapped in a gauzy white burial cloth, into a wooden box. The box belongs to the mosque, which lends it out to families to carry bodies to the graveyard.

They placed her body in a small delivery van and drove slowly, with scores of men walking behind, to the cemetery, where many dead mothers had

come before.

No women were allowed at the burial, as is common in many Muslim communities. So the silent men walked slowly down an overgrown path, six of them carrying Fatmata's body, which they placed in a freshly dug hole in the rich, red soil.

Ten hours after she had taken her last breath, her sad-eyed husband tossed the first shovelful of dirt.



Male relatives and friends carry the body of Adama Sannoh past cottonwood trees to her grave near Sierra Leone's Atlantic coast.

Africa's Last and Least

*Cultural Expectations Ensure Women
Are Hit Hardest by Burgeoning Food Crisis*



Fanta Lingani sweeps an Ouagadougou street before dawn with a small bundle of sticks, a job that brings her about \$10 a month. She uses the dirt she sweeps up to fill potholes.

Story by KEVIN SULLIVAN | *Photos by* MICHAEL WILLIAMSON

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso — After she woke in the dark to sweep city streets, after she walked an hour to buy less than \$2 worth of food, after she cooked for two hours in the searing noon heat, Fanta Lingani served her family's only meal of the day. First she set out a bowl of corn mush, seasoned with tree leaves, dried fish and wood ashes, for the 11 smallest children, who tore into it with bare hands.

Then she set out a bowl for her husband. Then two bowls for a dozen older children. Then finally, after everyone else had finished, a bowl for herself. She always eats last.

A year ago, before food prices nearly doubled, Lingani would have had three meals a day of meat, rice and vegetables. Now two mouthfuls of bland mush would have to do her until tomorrow.

Rubbing her red-rimmed eyes, chewing lightly on a twig she picked off the ground, Lingani gave the last of her food to the children.

"I'm not hungry," she said.

In poor nations, such as Burkina Faso in the heart of West Africa, mealtime conspires against women. They grow the food, fetch the water, shop at the market and cook the meals. But when it comes time to eat, men and children eat first, and women eat last and least.

Soaring prices for food and fuel have pushed more than 130 million poor people across vast swaths of Africa, Asia and Latin America deeper into poverty in the past year, according to the U.N.



Fanta Lingani, left, cooks corn paste with other women in her family, flavoring it with salt, dried fish, leaves and ashes. In better times, the family would be eating beef or goat meat.

World Food Program (WFP). But while millions of men and children are also hungrier, women are often the hungriest and skinniest. Aid workers say malnutrition among women is emerging as a hidden consequence of the food crisis.

"It's a cultural thing," said Herve Kone, director of a group that promotes development, social justice and human rights in Burkina Faso. "When the kids are hungry, they go to their mother, not their father. And when there is less food, women are the first to eat less."

A recent study by the aid group Catholic Relief Services found that many people in Burkina Faso are now spending 75

percent or more of their income on food, leaving little for other basic needs such as medical care, school fees and clothes.

Pregnant women and young mothers are forgoing medical care. More women are turning to prostitution to pay for food. And more families are pulling children — especially girls — out of school.

The food crisis has not yet led to famine, and in places such as Burkina Faso, people generally appear relatively

healthy. The WFP and other agencies have pumped in millions of dollars' worth of aid and food, and markets generally are well-stocked — just prohibitively expensive. But for poor people, food is increasingly difficult to come by, and many families sometimes eat as little as one meal a day. Aid agencies worry about the long-term effects of dramatically reduced diets.

As the crisis continues to build around the world, perhaps its most pervasive effect is the ache in the stomachs of millions of poor women like Fanta Lingani.



BY RENÉE RIGDON — THE WASHINGTON POST

Sweeping for Pennies

Lingani, who sleeps on a concrete floor, began one recent day at 4 a.m. and dressed quietly in the dark. All around her, children slept on the cracked floor under a tin roof, common conditions in a country that ranks 176th out of 177 on the U.N. Human Development Index.

A year ago, Lingani might have started a small fire to boil herself a cup of weak coffee. But even that is now too expensive.

Such sacrifices led to food riots in February in Ouagadougou, the capital, and towns across the country. Hundreds of people were arrested after they set fires and

smashed government buildings to protest rising prices. But for Lingani, the struggle is quieter, and harder by the day, and it starts before the sun comes up.

Lingani, who said she is about 50, walked across the dirt courtyard past the two-room hut where her husband was sleeping in his own double bed, with a thick mattress. The dirt street outside was muddy and steamy from an overnight rain shower.

After a half-hour walk on the black-dark streets, she reported for work and pulled on the long green smock of the Green Brigade, a city program that pays poor women the equivalent of about \$1.20 a day to sweep streets two mornings a week.

Lingani picked up a pair of small straw brooms and pushed a wheelbarrow onto a wide, deserted avenue. In the orange haze of streetlights, she bent over at the waist, so far that her bottom was higher than her head, and started pushing red dust into little piles.

The “shssssh shssssh” of her sweep-



Hungry boys run off with a bird they had caught, destined for the cooking pot. At mealtimes, men and children eat first, and women eat last and least.

ing was the only sound, except for the crowing of a few roosters and occasional laughter from men at an all-night bar down the road.

She worked a section of road about 150 yards long, while a dozen others in the all-female brigade swept along. A tanker truck sped down the street, kicking up a cloud of dust into her face and blowing away her little piles. She coughed, pulled her pink head scarf across her face and swept the same dust all over again.

Lingani swept until the sun came up, pushing her piles onto a small metal dish, then dumping them into a wheelbarrow and finally into a pothole on an unpaved side street.

By 7 a.m., she'd finished her section. But she had to wait an hour for a male supervisor to show up and check her work. In two weeks, she would get her monthly pay of less than \$10.

'The Job of Women'

Lingani walked a half hour back to her house, where her huge family was starting to stir. She took off her smock and picked up a green plastic basket about the size of a shoebox.

Market time. She and one of her two "co-wives," Asseta Zagre, do the shopping on alternate days. Their husband's other wife, the senior of the three, is nearly blind and can't do chores anymore.

Polygamy is common in much of Africa. In this household, the patriarch is



Fanta Lingani's husband, Hamado Zorome, 68, chats with two of his grandchildren as they wait for the daily meal. Zorome's police pension is the extended family's main income.

Hamado Zorome, 68, a retired police officer whose pension is the family's main income — but he doesn't tell his wives how much he gets.

The pension of a mid-level civil servant is probably modest in Burkina Faso, where the United Nations says nearly 72 percent of the country's 15

million people live on less than \$2 a day.

Zorome also collects a “tip” of 60 cents from each of his two working wives when they get their monthly pay, which he uses to buy the kola nuts he likes to chew.

Lingani and Zagre, who also sweeps streets, said Zorome doles out small amounts of money for them to buy staples such as cornmeal. But the bulk of the family’s meals are paid for out of the wives’ sweeping wages.

Preparing to leave for the market, Lingani kept bending over and rubbing her ankles and feet. She said they hurt from sweeping for so long. She has never weighed herself, but she said she can feel a significant loss in her weight and strength in the past year.

Last month’s sweeping money was already gone. So she went to her husband, who handed her about \$2.50 for groceries. He told her to spend no more than about 75 cents and save the rest for



Boys play soccer in the alley near Fanta Lingani’s home in Ouagadougou. The girls are all working, either cooking or taking care of younger children. Boys learn early on that domestic work is solely the responsibility of women.

another day. "Women are born with this job" of feeding the family, Lingani said, as she walked around puddles and past goats tied to trees. "The man has to have his share. And we have to make sure the kids have their share. So we eat less."

Lingani said none of the older boys in the family has a steady job, since work is hard to come by in this poor city, so the boys mostly spend their days doing odd jobs or playing soccer. What little money they earn they tend to spend on food and beer for themselves, she said.

"A man can never sit at home. They are always out somewhere," Lingani said. "They don't do anything. They don't help."

Lingani walked past stands where women were selling fruit or water, assisted by small girls. A few men sold bags or charcoal, but most were sitting in the shade and talking.

"Men and women should fight together for the children," Lingani said. "But if the men won't do that, the women have to fight alone."

Zorome, Lingani's husband, said that men don't help with shopping and cooking because "that is the job of women." Like many men interviewed here, he said African culture clearly defines roles for men, who work outside the house, and women, who manage children and meals.

He said that men are willing to work but that jobs are scarce. He would prefer it if his wives didn't have to sweep



At a busy market in Ouagadougou, a small child attracted by a piece of fruit wanders away from her mother, who was working at a nearby vegetable stand.

"Women are born with this job. The man has to have his share. And we have to make sure the kids have their share. So we eat less."

Fanta Lingani

streets, but “life is much more expensive now.”

“Last year, we could eat well, but now, forget it,” he said. “My sons don’t work, so it’s up to me to feed 25 people. That’s why the women sweep. We don’t have anything, so they have to work. That’s life.”

On her way to the market, Lingani explained the ugly math: A year ago, she could feed her entire family a nutritious meal of meat and vegetables and peanut sauce for about 75 cents. But now the family gets much lower-quality food for twice the price.

She said the cost of six pounds of cornmeal has risen from 75 cents to \$1.50. A kilogram — 2.2 pounds — of rice cost 60 cents last year and costs a little more than \$1 now. Other basics such as salt and cooking oil have also doubled in price.

Fuel costs have more than doubled for trucks that haul food to landlocked Burkina Faso, helping keep food prices high.

Beef or goat meat is now so expensive — about \$1.20 for a tiny portion — that the family has given up meat completely, eating cheap dried fish instead. Rather than seasoning their sauces with vegetables and peanuts, they now use

the tough leaves of baobab trees, the gnarly giants that flourish here in the dry lands south of the Sahara.

To soften the leaves’ sour taste, Lingani mixes in potash, a paste made by boiling down water strained through ashes.

“In the past, our money would last the whole month. We might even have some left over,” Lingani said. “But now as soon as it arrives, we spend it.”

Dinner happens only if there is a bit of food left over from lunch. Even then, she said, there is rarely enough left for women.

“When the children ask for food, we have to give it to them,” she said. “We’re mothers.”

Never Enough

“Are you sure you don’t want more?” the vegetable vendor asked Lingani. “Is that enough for your family?”

Lingani, standing in a crowded neighborhood market, had just asked the woman for 30 cents’ worth of baobab leaves.

“No, it’s fine,” Lingani said, handing over a few coins.

The vendor shrugged and stashed the coins under a sack of tomatoes covered with a beard of small flies. She handed

Lingani some change, which she counted carefully.

At the next stall, Lingani bought four small onions. As she turned to leave, the seller tossed in a fifth with an under-standing smile. Lingani caught her eye and thanked her.

Moving through the churning mass of people, Lingani bought a bag of dried fish, a small plastic bag of salt, two small cubes of beef bouillon and a bag of potash, the paste made from ashes.

In 10 minutes, her shopping was done. She had spent double her budget of 75 cents.

After the half-hour walk home, with the temperature already above 90, Lingani and Zagre started plucking the baobab she bought at the market, saving the leaves and throwing away the thick stems.

For an hour, the two women methodically pounded the rough leaves in a wooden bowl, then dumped them into a pot boiling over a wood fire. Then Lingani added the dried fish and some of the ash flavoring.

"Of course we would prefer something else," she said. "But it's the cheapest thing we can buy, and we can afford enough to feed everybody."

Two hours after she started cooking,

**SCRAPING BY IN
OUAGADOUGOU:**

For a video and photo gallery featuring Fanta Lingani, log onto <http://www.washingtonpost.com/womansworld>.

Lingani scooped out six bowls of flavorless food. The first was for Zorome, delivered to his hut. He ate it alone, then said he felt as though he needed a nap.

Others were set aside to be shared by the children.

The last bowl, slightly larger than Zorome's, was to be shared by 10 people: Lingani, Zagre and eight small grandchildren. Lingani took two bites before letting five hungry toddlers finish her food.

Near the front gate, half a dozen children sat in a circle. They had built a play fire out of pieces of bark. On top they had placed a plastic cup, overflowing with street garbage.

They were pretending to cook. "We're cooking rice with meat!" said a beaming Ousmane, 6, the head chef.

His father, Zorome, watched the game and laughed. He was asked if he would eat again today. Yes, he said, Lingani would make him a little rice or porridge for dinner that night.


Nearby, his daughters and granddaughters heard him and exploded. “What are you talking about?” they said. “Why are you saying that? We have no food.”

Zorome smiled sadly and admitted his lie.

“When we have food one day, we have to tighten our belt the next,” he said. “But it is very hard for a man to admit when things are not good.”

Lingani was still sitting next to her empty food bowl. She had stopped the children from finishing one last lump of corn mush, about the size of her fist.

“The small children will be crying in a couple of hours, so we have to save it,” she said. Her voice was small and soft, and she didn’t look up from the red dirt. She said she felt “very sad.”

“I’m thinking too much,” she said. 



With gas prices soaring in Burkina Faso, many people are riding bicycles or scooters instead of driving cars in an effort to save money for food, which is also increasingly expensive.

'This Is the Destiny of Girls'

Across Much of South Asia, a Daughter's Life Is Circumscribed By Tradition and Poverty. But for Some, the Dreams Die Slower.



Jyotsna Patadia, 15, carries a pot of tea from her makeshift hut to her parents, laboring on the vast salt pans of western India.

Story by MARY JORDAN | *Photos by* NIKKI KAHN

LITTLE RANN OF KUTCH, India — In the soft light of dawn, the cracked, dry seabed stretched endlessly in every direction. Jyotsna Patadia was alone — she is often alone — in her family's grass hut, a speck of life in the emptiness, cooking potatoes and onions over an open fire.



Manju Kajani, foreground, and Mahadev Kajani rake salt crystals that are left behind as water evaporates in the baking sun. The salt is sold to flavor potato chips and scrambled eggs in distant lands.

From October to May, Jyotsna, 15, works here in the desolate salt pans of western India, where her parents earn a living coaxing salt from the ground. The family arrives when the summer monsoons end and the water submerging this vast plain recedes.

Her two younger brothers stay behind in their village, Kharaghoda, a chaotic mix of camels and water buffalo, schools and vegetable sellers, newborn babies and blind old men.

Though the village of 12,000 is a seven-hour walk from Jyotsna's isolated hut on the salt pans, it might as well be England, it feels so different and far away.

"It's easier to be a boy," said Jyotsna, who was forced to drop out of school at 10 to help her parents. "They get to go to school."

Jyotsna's mother said she could not afford to let all three of her children study, so she picked her daughter to work. It is a familiar story in much of

the developing world, and particularly South Asia. In India, half the women older than 15 are illiterate, twice the rate for men, and millions of poor girls are pulled out of school to help at home, often when they are 10 to 12 years old.

"I regret she has this hard life," said her mother, Ranjanben Patadia, 35. "But this is the destiny of girls. It was my destiny, too."

Unlike her mother, who never set foot in a classroom, Jyotsna did study on and off for a few years, thanks to a major government effort over the past decade to enroll all children. Though Jyotsna can still barely read or write, that progress has made her more aware of what she is now missing.

Human rights advocates say millions of teenage girls like Jyotsna are less resigned than their mothers were to the age-old preference in India for sons.

"Boys have more options," Jyotsna said one recent day as she tidied the one-room hut where she spends most of her time. She is told she is too old to play running games, yet notes that boys her age can.

Boys freely come and go, she said,



Jyotsna's mother, Ranjanben Patadia, 35, pauses for a drink of water. Ranjanben and her husband, Bhopabhai Patadia, 39, are paid 35 cents for every 220-pound bag they fill with salt.

but once girls reach puberty they are kept close to home, another reason that the start of a girl's menstrual period often means the end of her schooling.

"I would like to learn more," said Jyotsna, whose name means moonlight. She said people gossip that older girls who go to school "are too outgoing." But if she had more education, she said excitedly, "I would talk in front of 50, even 100 people!"



To this day, in some parts of India, fewer than eight girls are born for every 10 boys, because parents abort female fetuses, a legacy of a

‘The constitution says, yes, women are equal, but society says, no, they are not.’

Veena Padia



A distraught Jyotsna leaves her grandmother Shanti Patadia and brother Bharat for the salt pans, where she and her parents live in a primitive hut from October to May.

centuries-old mind-set that values boys more. Sons carry the family name, inherit land and become the main breadwinners.

In this patriarchal society, fathers and brothers are widely seen as the decision-makers, many even telling wives

and sisters what to cook and when to leave the house. Especially in rural India, girls are far likelier to die before age 5, because scarce food and medicine are given first to their brothers.

“The constitution says, yes, women are equal, but society says, no, they are

not," said Veena Padia, program director in India for the international aid group CARE. "We really feel angry and frustrated, at times even disgusted," at the bias against women, she said. "Mind-sets take a long time to change."

Padia said that middle- and upper-class women have made significant advances and that it is poor and marginalized women who suffer the greatest discrimination.

There are so many girls like Jyotsna in the salt pans, working while their brothers study, that CARE is supporting Ganatar, a local group that digs pits and covers them with burlap roofs to serve as makeshift classrooms. The hope is that parents might send their daughters to school if it were closer.

When girls marry, as Jyotsna is expected to soon, they move in with their in-laws. Many view it as a bad investment to spend scarce cash on pencils and notebooks for a daughter who will work most of her life for her husband's family.

"They call it 'watering somebody else's garden,'" said Susan Durston, an education adviser with UNICEF.

Long-standing social customs and beliefs bar girls from school in many parts of South Asia.

In Bangladesh, "Eve-teasing" — bullying and sexual harassment — hounds girls from class. In Afghanistan last month, Muslim extremists threw acid in the faces of girls walking to school as a warning to stay home. Zealots in northwestern Pakistan recently torched 150 schools for girls.

Usually, though, a quieter discrimination steals a girl's chance to learn. Every day, parents decide, for instance, to buy a bicycle so their son can get to school but refuse to spend money on a book for their daughter.



Jyotsna's brother Bharat, 13, bounced out of bed in a house that has everything Jyotsna's hut does not: electricity, a television, plenty of water, cousins dropping by.

After filling up on steaming tea and warm millet bread his grandmother served him, Bharat dressed in a spotless blue-checked shirt and blue pants and ran out the door into a dirt street filled with rickshaws and a buzz of laughter and life.

It was 7 a.m. and time to go to the Kharaghoda public school, just across the road.

When the bell rang in the courtyard, Bharat and others lined up to sing the



Jyotsna's brother Bharat, center, joins classmates at the start of a school day, learning that is denied his sister. Their mother says she can't afford to let all three of her children study.

national anthem. One boy beat a drum, two others clashed cymbals. Hands at their sides, the students stood in front of a picture of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge. There were 60 boys and 30 girls.

A 10-year-old girl named Hiral straggled in late, holding the hands of her brother and sister, ages 3 and 5. They would sit beside her all day in class, a practice teachers allow to encourage

girls to come to school even when their parents make them babysit.

Bharat had no such distractions.

At 8 a.m. sharp, with his thick black hair combed neatly and his eyes bright and eager, he sat near the window in Classroom 4 reading about how India won its independence in 1947.

His room, in a century-old building that was once a jail, ached for paint. It is not that anyone here has much, human

rights advocates say, but rather that what little there is so often goes to boys.

In Bharat's class there were 21 boys and nine girls. The male teacher — many elementary school teachers in India are male — spoke near a poster with pictures of 24 Indian leaders. With the exception of Indira Gandhi, all were men.

The teacher, Surendra Zala, lectured about British colonial rule. Speaking in the local Gujarati language, he told his students it was important to learn English, "because you need it to be connected to the world and the Internet."

Bharat listened intently, neatly jotting down notes. His cotton book bag bulged with 29 workbooks and notepads. History is his favorite subject, and Mahatma Gandhi is his hero because he "won independence peacefully," he said later.

Geometry was next, and then recess, when Bharat stopped drawing rectangles and ran toward a wobbly aluminum slide in the dusty schoolyard.

In English class, he pulled out his notebook full of random sentences:

Dev plays cricket. Meet my friend Pittu. There is a peacock in the garden.

A cooling breeze drifted in through the classroom window.



Clack. Clack. Clack. The "machine," as everyone calls their water pump, sounds like a heartbeat. And in a way, it is. If it stops, so does life here. No more salt, money, meals. Jyotsna's parents earn \$500 annually from mining salt, and that all depends on the rickety old pump sucking briny underground water to the surface.

Once there, the water is channeled into hand-dug ponds. The sun bakes it, and the salt crystals left behind are sold to flavor potato chips and scrambled eggs in distant lands.

One of Jyotsna's chores is to make sure that the machine, just outside the family's hut, keeps clackity-clacking. Sometimes it overheats or the fan belt breaks. Jyotsna then signals for help by holding a mirror up to the sun, creating flashes of light, and her parents come running.

At 6 one recent morning, Jyotsna had her breakfast: a cup of black tea. Milk doesn't exist in this place with no refrigeration. She brushed her brilliant white teeth with a toothbrush she keeps in a



FIELDS OF SALT: For more photos and a video of life on India's salt pans, log onto <http://www.washingtonpost.com/womansworld>.

cranny in the dried-grass wall. There is no sink, no toilet.

Her parents had left before sunrise. They earn 35 cents for every 220-pound bag they fill with salt, so they start early and work late.

Dressed in a saffron-colored salwar-kameez, her bead necklace held togeth-

er with a safety pin, Jyotsna folded the covers on her parents' cots. She sleeps on a thin bed of blankets in the dirt.

As daylight broke, she swept. The night's wind, as always, had blown back the caked mud she brushed away the day before. Her tiny 4-foot-10 frame bent at the waist, she tidied her patch of the plain, again.



Ugabhai Patadia, left, makes his way into a well to start the machinery as his brother — Jyotsna's father, Bhopabhai — prepares to help with the daily ritual of starting the pump.

'The boys don't do anything. Just eat and play. We have to teach the girls how to work.'

Jyotsna's grandmother, Shanti Patadia

By mid-morning she had warmed the previous night's lentils, bread and other leftovers and carried them to her parents for breakfast, a water jug balanced on her head.

Her parents struggle in the heat, and her father, Bhopabhai Patadia, 39, sometimes collapses. He has high blood pressure, as do many people here, because too much salt seeps into his body through cracks in his bare feet.

"I have the same problem," Jyotsna's mother said. "But I don't take medicine. We can't afford medicine for everyone."

In the evening sometimes, her husband smokes a bidi, a cheaper version of a cigarette. It's an indulgence, his wife explained, that "is only for men."

Jyotsna's father handed his daughter his empty water cup with a kind nod but not a single word. Then he and his wife began another shift in the unrelenting sun.

"No, it's not fair" that young boys study and girls work, he would say later. "But what can we do?"

Back at the hut, after washing the dishes, Jyotsna put chilies on a stone

and ground them into a red paste, an hour's work, the start of another meal.



By noon, Bharat was home again, eating spicy bread flavored with chilies and vegetable curry.

"I will do my homework later," he told his grandmother as he flipped on the old black-and-white TV set. It was too hot to play cricket, his passion, he explained, so he lay on his bed to watch TV, his hands behind his head.

It was cool inside; he didn't bother with the overhead electric fan as he watched a show about the Hindu deity Lord Krishna, interrupted by a blaring ad urging people to buy gemstones corresponding to their zodiac signs.

Any chores to do today?

Bharat shook his head no.

"The boys don't do anything. Just eat and play," said his grandmother, Shanti Patadia. "We have to teach the girls how to work in a house because they will get married, but the boys don't even know how to sweep."

Bharat nodded.

"If a boy would do all these things in the house, people would think he is girlish," his grandmother said. "People would laugh."

Bharat said he misses Jyotsna, especially at mealtimes. "If she were here," he said, "she could help with the cleaning and cooking."

Next year, Bharat will ride his bicycle to the secondary school, farther away, where there are three boys for every girl.

"I hope the boys still talk to me when they become government workers," Shanti Patadia said, delighted at the idea her grandsons might one day have a handsome salary and easier lifestyle.

As for Jyotsna, she said, with a grandmother's knowing look, "In a year or two, we will get her married."



As the sun burned in the afternoon sky and turned these barren plains into a flat oven the size of Rhode Island, Jyotsna clung to the shade around her hut, sweeping, cooking and washing.

The nearest neighbor is a mile away; families live apart so their pumps aren't competing for the same salty water. Her brothers hear news at school and on TV.



Shanti Patadia, Jyotsna's grandmother, says girls must learn how to work in a house "because they will get married, but the boys don't even know how to sweep."

She did not know that all of India had just celebrated a successful lunar mission and planted its flag on the moon. She had never heard of Barack Obama.

"If I had a choice, I wouldn't marry," she said, her eyes tearing, as they often do when she talks about what life will bring her next.

As she pulled a few more onions from a burlap sack, she said she daydreams of cooking like a chef she once saw on TV: "I dream I can buy the ingredients and know how to write down the recipes."

She said she could copy words from a blackboard but is unable to write down words she hears spoken.

"My brothers, they will study. They can hope for different things," she said. "What can I be?"

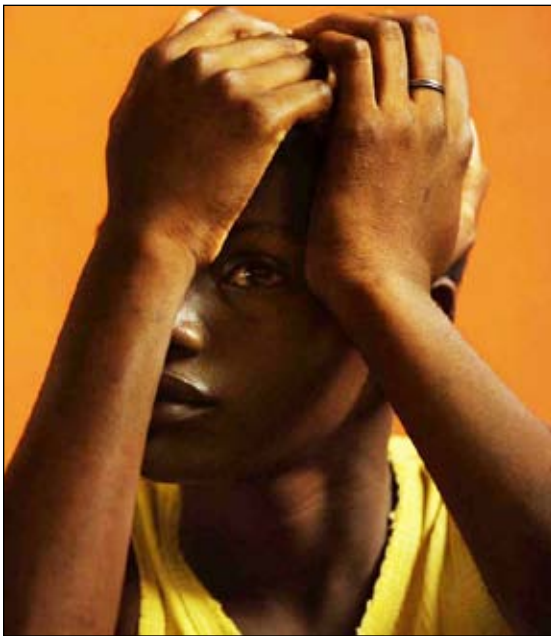


In Togo, a 10-Year-Old's Muted Cry: 'I Couldn't Take Any More'

As the Global Trade in Domestic Workers Surges, Millions of Young Girls Face Exploitation and Abuse

Story by KEVIN SULLIVAN | Photos by LINDA DAVIDSON

LOME, Togo — Adiza ran scared and crying into the street. Ten years old and 4-foot-9, she fled the house where she had worked for more than a year, cleaning and sweeping from before dawn until late at night. She ran to a woman selling food in the street and told her that since the day she had arrived in this capital city from her village in the country, her employer had beaten her almost daily and kept her in slavelike conditions.



Adiza left her village to work in a household in Lome, Togo's capital, where she says she was beaten almost daily. After 14 months, she fled her employer. Now she lives in a shelter with many girls who escaped similar situations.

“I couldn’t take any more,” recalled Adiza, a slight girl with close-cropped hair and almond-shaped eyes, who talked in a halting whisper as she described how her employer beat her with her hands and with cooking pots before the November day she ran away.

Rarely making eye contact, Adiza spoke in a shelter here surrounded by

other tiny girls who had suffered physical or sexual abuse in the growing global trade in domestic servants.

The number of girls like Adiza, who leave their communities or even their countries to clean other people’s houses, has surged in recent years, according to labor and human rights specialists. The girls in the maid trade, some as young as 5, often go unpaid, and their work in private homes means the abuses they suffer are out of public view.

The International Labor Organization (ILO), a U.N. agency based in Geneva, said more girls under 16 work in domestic service than in any other category of child labor. The organization said that maids are among the most exploited workers and that few nations have adequate regulations to safeguard them.

Rights groups say rural families often send their girls off to work willingly, as a way to escape poverty, not understanding the risks of abuse. And the employers are often only marginally better off. Having climbed a step or two on the economic ladder, they can afford one of the first trappings of prosperity: a girl to do the chores.

Human Rights Watch has documented nearly 150 cases of female domestic workers from Indonesia who killed themselves in recent years in Singapore,



BY NATHANIEL VAUGHN KELSO — THE WASHINGTON POST

In Togo, Hundreds of Girls Seek Shelter From Employers



Children play at the Oasis Center, the largest of several shelters for abused children in Lome, the seaside capital of Togo. The center, run by the Swiss charity Terre des Hommes, shelters more than 600 children a year — more than 400 of them girls, mostly abused domestic workers.

many jumping to their deaths from high-rise apartments. In Saudi Arabia, thousands of girls and women from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Indonesia and other nations have fled abusive employers, according to the New York-based rights group.

In Lome, a seaside city of about 700,000 people in this former French colony, hundreds of girls a year seek protection from abusive employers. They have filled up the shelters here, many with faces, backs and arms covered with bruises and burns.

“This is an alarming human tragedy that the world has yet to wake up to,” said Roger Plant, a top ILO official who specializes in human trafficking. “You have several million girls who are in these desperate situations, and they are off the radar screens.”

A Fraying of Trust

Adiza was raised in Kpatchile, a few mud huts scattered among fields of

corn and yams 250 miles north of Lome. The village is 12 miles from the nearest paved road, and Adiza's home is another quarter-mile down a tiny path through the tall brush.

“Everybody wants to leave,” said Yacoumon Djatao, the aunt who raised Adiza, sitting in the shade on a 102-degree day, fighting fever and nausea from her latest bout of malaria — a common ailment here. Rust-colored sorghum plants were drying on the



A Togolese girl sells scissors and razor blades on the street in Lome. Many young girls sell goods for employers by day, then do domestic chores at night.

roof of her thatched hut. She will grind the dried grain into porridge, her main food until the next harvest, six months from now.

Djatao said she had raised Adiza since the child's parents separated, years ago. She said Adiza was a cheerful little girl who was happy to work around the house and in the fields.

One day in the local outdoor market, Djatao said, she saw Adiza getting into a car that everyone knew was heading to neighboring Nigeria. Alarmed, Djatao stopped her and brought her home.

Togolese girls leave places like this every day. They have little or no schooling and no skills other than sweeping and cleaning. So they leave to keep house for richer people in Lome or neighboring countries or places as far-off as France, Germany, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

Often the girls are placed in jobs according to an African tradition known as "confiage," or entrusting. Rural families send their daughters to live with a

relative, friend or someone else with a connection to their village, in arrangements often managed by a go-between who is known to the family. The agreement is that the girls will do domestic work and that in exchange they will be paid, sent to school and maybe even be able send some money home.

That system has broken down in Togo as the country's economy has faltered. Villagers have grown more desperate and the go-betweens less scrupulous, often placing girls with strangers and keeping their pay for themselves.

Visions of Opportunity

For nearly four decades, Togo suffered under the rule of Gnassingbé Eyadéma, a president who suffocated his country politically and economically until he died in 2005. His son, Faure Gnassingbé, is now president.

In the countryside, where 90 percent of the people are impoverished, many girls see hope in the capital, where only a quarter of the population lives in poverty, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Some leave the country altogether, seeing Nigeria — where the per capita annual income is \$2,100, compared



ADIZA'S STORY: A video report on Adiza's plight and the challenges facing girls like her is online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/womansworld>.

with Togo's \$900 — as a land of opportunity.

Madjinteba Seritichi, a local government official, said many of the intermediaries are people who come to shop in the local markets. He said they often use the signs of their success — cellphones and expensive jewelry and clothes — to entice girls to come with them.

“Given our poverty, the parents are all too willing to hand over their children,” said Seritichi, who said he has handled seven recent abuse cases in his small collection of villages.

He said two of the girls went to Lome, one went to Gabon, and the four others went to Nigeria. All were beaten, several were sexually abused, and none was paid.

Djatao said she had worried that Adiza might fall into the same trap. But the elderly aunt saw what she thought was a safe opportunity one day when a woman she knew from the local market said she was looking for a girl to work in Lome.



Nefisa Wuregawu, front, brokered the deal that brought Adiza to the capital. “I’m not a trafficker,” Wuregawu said. “I’m a trader. The families of these children need help, the employers need help, so I provide for both of them.”

The woman, Nefisa Wuregawu, was a well-known trader who bought corn and beans in rural markets and resold them in Lome. She told Djatao she could get Adiza a job working for a good family in Lome.

“At least this way I knew the person who would take her,” said Djatao, who said goodbye to Adiza 14 months ago, when the girl climbed onto a sagging,

overcrowded bus with Wuregawu for the 12-hour drive to the capital.

Sitting in her extended family's little compound of huts, where she lives with 23 people, Djatao said she was upset to learn that Adiza had been mistreated. But, she said, she still wasn't sure if that was reason enough for Adiza to come home.

"I didn't know she would be harmed," she said. "But we have nothing here."

'More Like a Spanking'

When Adiza arrived in Lome after the day-long bus trip, she recalled, it was the first time she had seen tall buildings, or television, or the ocean.

She went immediately to work in the home of Alimatou Abdulai, 53, who runs a small business selling rice in her local market.

One recent day, Abdulai, a tall woman with strong, broad shoulders, sat beneath the two big mango trees that shade her family home.

Abdulai's house is comfortable by Lome standards. It has electricity and a television and plenty of room for Abdulai, her husband and four of their six grown children. In the street, women have their hair braided and styled in



Elisabeth arrived at the Oasis Center with scars she said were inflicted by her employer. The girl, believed to be 6 or 7, is from Ghana.

a pleasant outdoor beauty salon on a shady corner nearby.

But Abdulai's family finances are still modest. None of the men in her house has a job, so her earnings of about \$1 to \$5 a day constitute the main income.

Her two daughters had married and moved away, she said, so she was looking for a girl to help cook and clean. By local tradition, men don't help with housework.

"I needed a domestic so I could run my business," Abdulai said, saying that

the 20 cents a day she agreed to pay Adiza was a good investment.

Abdulai said that she didn't know it is illegal in Togo to hire a girl younger than 15 and that she had no qualms about hiring Adiza when she was just 9. "The work she did for me is not work that requires strength," she said.

Abdulai said she paid Adiza's wages directly to Wuregawu, the go-between.

Over the past year, she said, she had given Wuregawu about \$42, or seven months' salary, on the understanding that Wuregawu would take the money to Adiza's family.

She didn't send Adiza to school, she said, because "that's her parents' responsibility."

"I was teaching her how to cook," she said.



Naudege, left, is back in school in her village after returning from Lome, where she says an employer cut her with razor blades when she was unhappy with the girl's work. Naudege found help at the World Association for Orphans-Africa, a group that temporarily houses abused children.

Sitting in her yard, Abdulai denied that she beat Adiza — except for one time, on the day the girl left. She said Adiza had left the house the night before and not returned until after midnight. Furious, Abdulai hit her a few times around the head and shoulders.

“It was more like a spanking, not a beating,” she said.

Just Trying to Help

Wuregawu sat on a wooden bench in a Lome neighborhood last week, wearing flowing red African robes, a matching head scarf, and gold jewelry dangling from her neck and ears.

“I’m not a trafficker,” she said, laughing and waving her hands, dismissing the idea. “I’m a trader. The families of these children need help, the employers need help, so I provide for both of them.”

She said bringing Adiza to Lome was a “service,” for which she wasn’t paid.

“When you go to the villages, you see that the people are suffering because they are very poor,” she said. “They think that if they can go to the city, they will not suffer. So I help them.”

Wuregawu said she had brought only Adiza and one other girl to Lome.

She confirmed that Abdulai had given her \$42 for Adiza’s wages and said she used the money to buy clothes for Adiza to put toward her wedding dowry, which she was storing for the girl in her home.

Asked if a 10-year-old girl might need the money, or the clothes, now rather than later, Wuregawu said she was simply following local tradition.

“In our country, when a girl gets married, she has to have money and clothes,” she said. “That’s our culture.”

She said she didn’t know if Adiza had been beaten. “I can’t tell who is telling the truth and who is lying,” she said.

Togo passed a law banning child trafficking in 2005, and about 20 people — mostly women — have been prosecuted since then for trafficking children across Togo’s borders, said Abra Tekpo Agbezo, head of the national police department’s child protection unit.

But, she said, not a single case of internal trafficking has been prosecuted, even though her officers go out an average of twice a week to rescue girls in domestic service who are being abused.

“This is something that has been going on for a long time,” Agbezo said. “It will take even longer for people to change their attitudes.”

Wuregawu, sipping a milky drink from a big plastic cup, said she had no idea it was illegal for a 10-year-old child to work.

"I am not aware of those legal things," she said, laughing heartily.

'Tip of the Iceberg'

When Adiza ran away from Abdulai's house, the food vendor who saw her crying and listened to her story took her to a local political official. He called the Oasis Center, the largest of several shelters for abused children in Lome.

Run by a Swiss charity, Terre des Hommes, the center shelters more than 600 children a year — more than 400 of them girls, mostly abused domestic workers.

"These are just the ones we reach," said Jerome Combes, the organization's head in Togo. "It's just the tip of the iceberg."

Combes said that the shelter's social workers and lawyer try to investigate each case but that it's often impossible. They notify police about the worst cases of abuse. But mostly they try to make the girls safe, negotiate for back wages and tell employers about the child labor laws.

In Adiza's case, center officials found Abdulai and urged her to come in for mediation. She came to the office and

paid Adiza an additional \$42, the balance of her wages. They were trying to track down what happened to the money she paid Wuregawu.

Interviewed several times over the course of a week, Adiza answered questions with one word or a nod, fiddling with her hands and picking absently at her toes.

She said she would like to learn to be a seamstress and make dresses back in her village. But at the shelter she has been making Christmas decorations and learning carols in French.

Sometimes she and the other girls put on little blue soccer uniforms and head to Lome's wide, palm-lined beach to kick a ball around. Adiza rarely smiles, but on the beach, playing with her friends, she sometimes laughs so hard she doubles over.

Combes said Adiza's options are limited. At 10, she is far too young to work legally, and in the local culture, she is seen as too old to start school.

It is almost certain, Combes said, that when Adiza leaves the shelter she will end up cleaning someone else's house. So the center will tell her about her rights and how to avoid being exploited. "The best we can do is to teach her to protect herself," he said.



For Kurdish Girls, A Painful Ancient Ritual

*The Widespread Practice of Female Circumcision
In Iraq's North Highlights the Plight of Women
In a Region Often Seen as More Socially Progressive*

Story by AMIT R. PALEY | Photos by ANDREA BRUCE

TUZ KHURMATU, Iraq — Sheelan Anwar Omer, a shy 7-year-old Kurdish girl, bounded into her neighbor's house with an ear-to-ear smile, looking for the party her mother had promised. There was no celebration. Instead, a local woman quickly locked a rusty red door behind Sheelan, who looked bewildered when her mother ordered the girl to remove her under-pants.



Before the procedure, Sheelan Anwar Omer, 7, second from right, waits for the expected party.

Sheelan began to whimper, then tremble, while the women pushed apart her legs and a midwife raised a stainless-steel razor blade in the air. “I do this in the name of Allah!” she intoned.

As the midwife sliced off part of Sheelan’s genitals, the girl let out a high-pitched wail heard throughout the neighborhood. As she carried the sobbing child back home, Sheelan’s mother smiled with pride.

“This is the practice of the Kurdish people for as long as anyone can remember,” said the mother, Aisha Hameed, 30, a housewife in this ethnically mixed town about 100 miles north of Baghdad. “We don’t know why we do it, but we will never stop because Islam and our elders require it.”

Kurdistan is the only known part of Iraq—and one of the few places in the world—where female circumcision is widespread. More than 60 percent of women in Kurdish areas of northern Iraq have been circumcised, according to a study conducted this year. In at least one Kurdish territory, 95 percent of women have undergone the practice, which human rights groups call female genital mutilation.

The practice, and the Kurdish parliament’s refusal to outlaw it, highlight



Sheelan enters a room looking for the party her mother had promised. As the door was closed behind the girl, her mother told her to take off her underwear.

the plight of women in a region with a reputation for having a more progressive society than the rest of Iraq. Advocates for women point to the increasing frequency of honor killings against women and female self-immolations in Kurdistan this year as further evidence that women in the area still face significant obstacles, despite efforts to raise public awareness of circumcision and violence against women.

“When the Kurdish people were fighting for our independence, women participated as full members in the underground resistance,” said Pakshan Zangana, who heads the women’s committee in the Kurdish parliament. “But now that we have won our freedom, the position of women has been pushed backwards and crimes against us are minimized.”

Zangana has been lobbying for a law in Kurdistan, a semiautonomous region with its own government, that would impose jail terms of up to 10 years on

those who carry out or facilitate female circumcision. But the legislation has been stalled in parliament for nearly a year, because of what women’s advocates believe is reluctance by senior Kurdish leaders to draw international public attention to the little-noticed tradition.

The Kurdish region’s minister of human rights, Yousif Mohammad Aziz, said he didn’t think the issue required action by parliament. “Not every small problem in the community has to have a law dealing with it,” he said.



Sheelan and her mother watch the midwife preparing the tools of circumcision, before Sheelan realizes what is about to take place.

The practice of female circumcision is extremely rare in the Arab parts of Iraq, according to women's groups. They say it is not clear why the practice — common in some parts of Africa and the Middle East — became popular with Iraqi Kurds but not Iraqi Arabs.

Supporters of female circumcision said the practice, which has been a ritual in their culture for countless generations, is rooted in sayings they attribute to the prophet Muhammad, though the accuracy of those sayings is disputed by other Muslim scholars. The circumcision is performed by women on women, and men are usually not involved in the procedure. In the case of Sheelan, her mother informed her father that she was going to have the circumcision performed, but otherwise, he played no role.

Kurds who support circumcising girls say the practice has two goals: It controls a woman's sexual desires, and it makes her spiritually clean so that others can eat the meals she prepares.

"I would not eat food from the hands of someone who did not have the procedure," said Hurmet Kitab, a housewife who said she was 91 years old.

Kitab, who lives in the village of Kalar in Kurdistan's eastern Germian area, where female circumcision is prevalent,

has had the procedure done on herself and all her daughters. When asked if she would have her 10-month-old granddaughter Saya circumcised, Kitab said "Of course" and explained that the procedure is painless.

"They just cut off a little bit," she said, flicking her finger at the top part of a key, which she then dropped on the floor.

Women's rights groups in Kurdistan are working eagerly to change the perception that the procedure is harmless and that it is required under Islam. They go to villages in rural areas where the practice is most ingrained and tell women and religious leaders of the physical and psychological damage the circumcision can cause. Health experts say the procedure can result in adverse medical consequences for women, including infections, chronic pain and increased risks during childbirth.

Ghamjeen Shaker, a 13-year-old from the Kurdish capital of Irbil, said she is still traumatized from the day she was circumcised. She sits with her legs clenched together and her hands clasped tightly on her lap, as if protecting herself from another operation. Indeed, Shaker says she sometimes dreams that the midwife who circumcised her is coming back to perform the procedure again.



While Sheelan is held by her mother and another woman, a midwife slices part of her genitals.

She was 5 when her mother sent her out to buy parsley and then locked her in the front yard of their home with six other girls. “I knew something bad was going to happen, but I didn’t know exactly where they were going to cut,” she recalled. “My family just kept saying, don’t worry, this is a social custom we have been doing forever.”

“They pinned me to the ground, and I just cried and cried,” said Shaker, who spoke barely above a whisper. “I was just so astonished. But now I realize that they want to prevent women from living their lives normally.”

Her mother, Shukria Ismaeel Jarjees, a 38-year-old housewife, said she was forced by her relatives and elderly women in the community to have her daughter circumcised. “I made a huge mistake, and now my daughter is always complaining of pain in her pelvis,” Jarjees said. Her eyes began to fill with tears. “I now advise my daughters to never circumcise their children.”

Shaker hopes to become a social worker focusing on women’s issues, in particular other girls traumatized by female circumcision.

"I want to make sure the world understands they cannot silence girls like this," she said.

Susan Faqi Rasheed, president of the Irbil branch of the Kurdistan Women's Union, said that even in the cosmopolitan capital, as many as a third of young girls are circumcised. "When the Kurds hold on to something, they hold on to it strongly," she said. "So now they hold to Islam more than the Arabs."

One of the religious leaders who have been less vocal in demanding female circumcisions is Hama Ameen Abdul Kader Hussein, preacher at the Grand Mosque of Kalar and head of the clergymen's union in German. Previously, he preached that female circumcision was required. Now he says it is optional, which Hussein believes has caused the area's rate of female circumcision to drop from 100 percent to about 50 percent.

"If there is any harm in this exercise," he said, "we should not do it."

Despite the outreach efforts, a study of women in more than 300 Kurdish villages by WADI, a German nongovernmental group that advocates against female circumcision, found that 62 percent underwent the procedure.

In Tuz Khurmatu, the most famous practitioner of female circumcision is

**SHEELAN'S CIRCUMCISION:**

A gallery of photographs by Andrea Bruce is online at

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/womansworld>

Maharoub Juwad Nawchas, a 40-year-old midwife with traditional Kurdish tattoos covering her chin. She learned from her mother, who used to perform the procedure for free, though Nawchas now charges 4,000 Iraqi dinars, or just under \$3.50, because her husband is disabled and can't work. She has circumcised about 30 girls a year for the past two decades.

On the day she circumcised Sheelan, the midwife began the ritual by laying down an empty white potato sack to serve as her working area. AK-47 assault rifles hung from the wall of the dingy concrete house, and watermelons rested below.

When Sheelan entered the room, her mother, Nawchas and a local woman placed the girl on a tiny wooden stool the size of a brick. The midwife applied yellow antiseptic to her pelvic area and injected her with lignocaine, an anesthetic. Little children peeked through the window to see what the noise was about.


"It's all right, it's all right," Sheelan's mother whispered, as the girl screamed so loudly her face turned red. She tried

to bunch up her skirt over her pelvis and shield the area with her hand, but the women jerked her arms back.

Then Nawchas uttered the prayer, made a swift cut, and immediately moved the girl over a pile of ashes to control the bleeding. The entire ritual took less than 10 minutes.

Back home, Sheelan lay on the floor, unable to move or talk much. She clutched a bag filled with orange soda and candy and barely said anything except that she was in pain.

But she became more animated when asked whether it was worth it to have the operation so her friends and neighbors would be comfortable eating food she prepared. "I would do anything not to have this pain, even if meant they would not eat from my hands," she rasped slowly.

"I just wish that I could be the way I was before the procedure," she said. 

Staff photographer Andrea Bruce and special correspondents Nian Ahmed and Dlovan Brwari contributed to this report.



Sheelan is carried home by her mother, Aisha Hameed, after her circumcision. "This is the practice of the Kurdish people for as long as anyone can remember," Hameed says.

In Affluent Germany, Women Still Confront Traditional Bias

Female Workers Employ 2006 Law for Pay Equity

Story and Photos by MARY JORDAN

HAMBURG — Margret Jonik, a tall redhead with a nagging smoker's cough, has been pushing cargo around a warehouse floor in steel-toed shoes for 21 years. Jonik has given her aching back and more than a third of her life to Suederelbe Logistik on the Hamburg harbor front. So she was furious last year, she said, when she discovered that her male colleagues were being paid higher wages for exactly the same work.

In the past, her anger might have come to nothing in a German business world dominated by men. But by using a recently enacted anti-discrimination law, Jonik and dozens of female co-workers were able to sue the company, which settled out of court and agreed to raise the women's pay.

"I am very happy, not just for myself but also for other women in Germany," said Jonik, 57, a quiet pioneer in a workplace battle that women are waging in many of the world's wealthiest nations, including the United States.

The global struggle for women's

equality often focuses on the developing world, where women still lack some of the most basic of rights, including education and protection from rape. But in many affluent countries, women's rights advocates say, gender bias endures. It is just harder to see.

German law requires that men and women be treated equally; labor contracts that once specified that women be paid 80 percent of the male rate are long gone. The government is headed by a woman, Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Yet many Germans, male and female, continue to hold to the traditional



Margret Jonik, a warehouse worker, joined dozens of female colleagues who won a settlement after they discovered they were being paid less for the same work.

German notion that a woman's focus should be "Kinder, Kueche, Kirche" — children, kitchen, church.

Women who do work often find stubborn barriers. German government statistics show that men typically earn 24 percent more per hour than women, among the widest gender pay gaps in Europe. A recent study comparing men and women in the same jobs at the same

firms concluded that women earned 88 percent of what men did.

"This is a significant difference," said study co-author Thomas Hinz, a professor at the University of Konstanz, adding that he found that "real discrimination is a factor" in the pay gap.

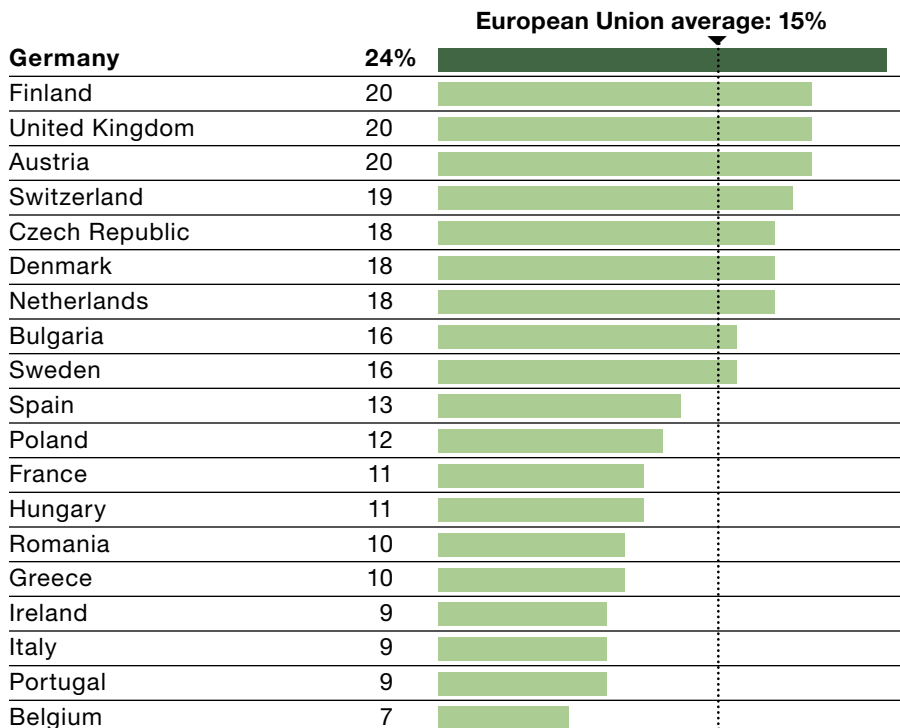
Women rarely hold top posts in German business. There is only one woman among the 200 people who sit on the

executive boards of the top 30 companies on the German DAX stock index, according to Christian Rickens, editor of Manager magazine. Those companies include global powers such as Lufthansa, Volkswagen, Bayer and Adidas.

“One is a pretty frightening number,” Rickens said. “You can’t say this is just because women choose to stay home with their children; one-third of women with university degrees don’t have children.”

Gender Pay Gap

Additional percent earned per hour by men compared with women in major European countries:



NOTE: Data are from 2005 and 2006, including some estimates.

“No company will tell you that you won’t get promoted because you are a woman,” Rickens said. But the people who run companies are men, he said, and they “like to surround themselves with people they trust, who think like they do — people like themselves.”

Barbara Steinhagen, 36, said age-old prejudices die hard. A former international marketing manager for a music company in Berlin, Steinhagen said she was promised a promotion that was abruptly given to a man when she announced she was pregnant. Her discrimination complaint, still pending, is the first of its kind to reach the German supreme court.

“A boss shouldn’t be allowed to judge if you can handle a child and a job,” Steinhagen said. In her view, when a male boss sees a pregnant employee he thinks: “Her child will be up at night and she will be tired, or she won’t be able to travel as much, or she won’t have her full attention on work.”

Steinhagen also said that laws aimed at protecting women can wind up hurting them. German employers are legally obligated to rehire women who go on maternity leave, even if they stay at home for as long as three years. But to get around the law, firms avoid hiring



GERMAN PAY INEQUITY:

A video by Mary Jordan is online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/womansworld>.

[washingtonpost.com/womansworld](http://www.washingtonpost.com/womansworld).

women or promoting them to high positions, she said.

“The laws are really backfiring,” she said.

In dozens of interviews with German men and women, nearly all agreed that many employers were openly reluctant to hire and promote women of child-bearing age.

Ralf Braun, 40, an Internet marketer, said it is only natural for a boss to think that a woman “at some point will get pregnant and stop working,” causing problems for the workplace. He predicted that there would never be complete gender equality at work: “It just can’t be 50-50. Even in 50 years, I don’t think it will be equal for women at work.”

Many men said they believed children and families benefited when women stayed at home instead of working.

Hans Meyer, 72, a retired engineer who used to run a Hamburg toolmaking company with 1,500 employees, said the “silent majority of women want to stay home and have families.”

“The public view today is only con-

cerned with the well-being of women, not of children,” Meyer said. “I believe that in the first three years, a mother should first and foremost be available for her child.”

Stefan Linz, 32, said it makes “no sense” to fight for equality on the job because men and women are not the same. As he balanced a five-gallon plastic jug on his left shoulder, making his rounds to deliver water to Hamburg offices, he said a woman wouldn’t be strong enough to do what he does.

“We should cherish the differences,” Linz said. “Women are the ones who get pregnant. Families are falling apart because women don’t stay home. Isn’t it time we just face the facts?”

Merkel’s government has made a priority of trying to improve conditions for working mothers, including a multi-billion-dollar plan to expand child care and a new effort to encourage fathers to take paternity leave.

In eastern Germany, which was a communist state until 1990, women were encouraged to work and an extensive child-care network helped them. Today, in the united country, working parents complain that child-care centers are scarce in the west and far more common in the east.



Hamburg resident Miriam Holzapfel, shown with her daughter Polly, is a university graduate and mother of two who lost her job after she had a baby.

The derogatory words “raven mother” are heard mostly in western Germany. The term means one who abandons her young in the nest to go off and pursue a career. “It’s a really ugly term. People say this about you behind your back,” said Miriam Holzapfel, 33, a university graduate and mother of two in Hamburg who lost her job after she had a baby. “My friends in the east don’t have this kind of social pressure.”

Jonik lives in a one-bedroom apartment in a working-class section of Hamburg, a rainy city on the North Sea where container ships and trucks line the harbor. She shares the home with her husband of 36 years, Wolfgang, a gardener who is out of work.

A small cat prowls the compact apartment, which is decorated with a collection of ceramic kittens. Colorful flowers and plants adorn a tiny balcony over a pleasant street south of the Elbe River.

Jonik left school at 16, trained to work in the restaurant business, then moved to Hamburg, looking for a job.

She chose not to have children. She had bills to pay, she said, and in her younger days it was even harder to hold a job and raise children. But with 1 p.m. school dismissals still the routine even for older children in Germany, she said, she continues to feel for working moms.

Over the years, Jonik said, an occasional stolen peek at a man's paycheck seemed to confirm suspicions women were not earning as much. But she became certain only last year, when employees formed a workers council, which was legally entitled to see all salaries.

"It was by no means fair," Jonik said, reading glasses hanging around her

neck. "What less pay means is that you are of less value."

Klaus Ihns, 62, a thoughtful, bespectacled, warehouse man who heads the workers council, said he immediately spotted the problem. "Soon as I looked down the list, alarms went off," he said.

Speaking on a drizzly day near the company's busy loading docks — where 18-wheelers arrive with car parts, toys and tea — Ihns said many women, including Jonik, were classified as office workers even though they were doing manual work, which normally commands higher pay.

When he told the company, he said, nothing changed, so the council sued to get raises the women deserved. "They were doing absolutely the same work as men," he said.

A 2006 anti-discrimination law gave the councils the right to sue on behalf of workers. That was a key change, Ihns said, because it made things easier for women reluctant to pursue litigation on their own.

Klaus Bertelsmann, the lawyer who represented Jonik and other women, said Suederelbe Logistik saved "a lot of money over years and years and years" by systematically paying women less.

Just as the lawsuit was about to go to

trial, the company settled out of court, giving Jonik a 13 percent pay raise. Now she earns 200 euros a month more, or just over \$250 at current exchange rates. She also received a one-time lump-sum payment of 1,500 euros. Thirty-six other female employees involved in the suit won higher salaries, too.

"This is not about men and women," said Hans-Dieter Kirschstein, director of Suederelbe Logistik. In a brief telephone interview, he said that he did not want to discuss the case but that his company did not discriminate against women. He suggested the lawsuit was settled because of concern about adverse publicity. Training, not gender, accounted for any pay differences, he said.

In Germany, employers often explain the gender pay gap by citing qualifications and seniority. They also say men negotiate harder for raises.


Many also argue that women are drawn to "pink-collar" jobs, such as nursing and teaching, that generally pay less than fields dominated by men, such as high-tech and corporate business. But women here are increasingly asking whether women are drawn to low-paying fields, or whether those fields are low-paying because they are predominantly female.

Sitting in her living room, Jonik said the settlement money has made a huge difference. After paying for rent, utilities and food from her salary — about \$26,000 a year — she has few splurges. But now, she said, she is enjoying the comfort "of being able to save a little each month for retirement."

As she headed back into the warehouse on her bicycle for a late shift that would end at 10 p.m., she said the "waters have smoothed" at work since the lawsuit. Many of her male co-workers are happy for the women, although none would agree to be interviewed as they came or left the loading dock one recent day, or even in calls afterwards.

But Jonik said that a few scars from her little skirmish in the gender wars remain.

"Every once in a while, when there is a heavy box — before, a man would have said, 'I'll get it.' Now he might say, 'You get it.'"

"Men," she said, shaking her head. 

Special correspondent Shannon Smiley contributed to this report.

In Britain, Rape Cases Seldom Result in a Conviction

Story and Photos by MARY JORDAN

LONDON — After Linda Davies reported to police that her 15-year-old daughter had been raped, it took three months — plus two dozen phone calls and a threat of legal action — before police questioned the suspect, a 28-year-old neighbor. “I gave police his name, address, mobile phone number, car registration — everything but his passport,” said Davies, 44, a strong-minded mother of two daughters. “I was basically begging them. He lived five minutes away from us.”

The suspect was finally arrested but acquitted at a trial in which the judge told the jury that he was “in a way a man of good character” because his previous criminal convictions, for possession of stolen goods and marijuana, did not involve violence.

Davies was furious at the judge, who also instructed the jurors to ignore the victim’s young age, and at police, who lost cellphone records that contradicted the defendant’s account.

“This has shattered us,” Davies said. “We felt like the whole system was against us.”



Linda Davies, facing camera, holds her teenage daughter, who was raped near their home. The suspect went free. “This has shattered us,” said Davies.

Davies said she was stunned to learn that her daughter's case was the rule, not the exception. According to government statistics, only 5.7 percent of rapes officially recorded by police in England and Wales end in a conviction.

"What are they saying?" Davies asked. "That 95 percent of women that come forward are telling lies?"

In Britain, a nation whose justice system has been used as a model around the globe, government officials and women's rights activists agree that rape goes largely unpunished.

Solicitor General Vera Baird, who oversees criminal prosecutions in England, estimated that 10 to 20 percent of rapes are brought to authorities' attention. According to government figures, 14,000 cases a year are reported and 19 out of 20 defendants walk free.

"There will never be proper female equality and appropriate dignity afforded to one-half of the population if it's possible to rape somebody and get away with it," said Baird, one of the highest-ranking women in the British government.

Thousands of victims each year once chose not to go to police because of shame, women's advocates say. Now, the advocates say, the bigger reason is that rape victims feel the system is stacked against them.

A 2005 report commissioned by the police found a "culture of skepticism" in the justice system when it came to rape cases, and recommended shifting the focus from seeking reasons not to believe the accuser to gathering evidence to support the charge.

Lisa Longstaff, spokeswoman for the London-based group Women Against Rape, said rape cases are "not a priority" for busy police and prosecutors and, as a result, "so few rapists get locked up that those who do feel unlucky rather than guilty."

Even some cases that do end in a guilty verdict stir outrage. Last year, a judge sentenced a 24-year-old man to two years in prison for having sex with a 10-year-old after concluding that the girl had "dressed provocatively."

Patricia Scotland, England's first female attorney general since the job was created in the 15th century, appealed that sentence. It was increased to four years.

Longstaff and others said that despite advances toward equality, sex crimes run up against a persistent societal bias —

**UNPUNISHED RAPES:**

A video by Mary Jordan is online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/womansworld/>.

[washingtonpost.com/womansworld/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/womansworld/)

pronounced in the male-dominated police and judicial system — that women have only themselves to blame.

Julie Bindel, a feminist activist and writer, said there has been a huge cultural shift since the 1950s and 1960s toward acceptance that unmarried women can have casual sex.

But, she said, “women are allowed that bit more freedom as long as men behave. When men choose not to, it comes right back at women: ‘What did you do to stop him? What was it about you that he chose you to rape?’”

A Claim of Mixed Signals

In a TV ad paid for by the police of Manchester, England, that began airing this month, a young man and woman are enjoying a pleasant evening, at first.

But after they drink alcohol, dance and kiss, the man leads the woman out of the nightclub, yanks her pants down and forces her to have sex against a wall as she cries, “No. No. . . . Get off of me.”

In the ad, the man is locked up. In real life, according to dozens of interviews with victims and experts, this is exactly the kind of case that ends in an acquittal, if it goes to court at all.

Acquittals are often won on the

“mucky sex” defense — that the man got mixed signals from the woman and what resulted really wasn’t rape.

Danielle West, 30, who reported to police that she was raped after a boozy office Christmas party in December 2006, said police seemed uninterested in her case once she said she had been drinking heavily.

West, an American who manages a team of Web analysts in London, turned visibly upset as she recounted her story in a quiet corner of a coffee shop. She said police, rather than giving her the benefit of the doubt, seemed “hostile” and intent on trying to “trip me up.”

“I was constantly fighting to get someone to believe me,” said West, who has a young daughter. She said a female officer flatly told her that she believed no crime had been committed and that West had simply gotten “drunk and had a shag,” a British term for sex.

“I couldn’t believe it,” West said. “If you had told me this was modern-day Kabul, okay. But London?”

She has since hired a lawyer to file a formal complaint against the police. A police spokesman said it was “inappropriate” to comment on West’s case because an investigation into her complaint was ongoing.

Debaleena Dasgupta, a lawyer who represents West, said another client filed a complaint against an officer who allowed a man accused of rape to go on vacation before police took his statement. In yet another case, a 38-year-old woman from Cornwall said police interviewed, weeks apart, two men whom she accused of raping her one night, giving them time to coordinate their stories.

Improving Investigations

“We have got to do better,” said John Yates, assistant commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police. He described the rape conviction rate as “appalling” and said police had “to build better cases.”

Rape cases are particularly challenging, he said, because women often delay reporting, there are no eyewitnesses and alcohol blurs the victim’s recollection of details.

“Every crime requires good first steps,” he said, such as interviewing witnesses immediately and grabbing footage off the millions of closed-circuit

security cameras in Britain. “If you get the first steps wrong, it’s hard to re-create it.”

About 25 percent of reports of assault and 75 percent of homicides lead to someone being found guilty. In the 1970s, the rape conviction rate ran at more than 30 percent. The difference now is that there are far more “date rape” cases — like the one depicted in the Manchester police ad.

Kerim Fuad, a barrister who has defended more than 100 men accused of rape, including the defendant in the Davies case, said most of the time the defendant and the accuser know each other and the jury must decide whom to believe.

A woman always has a right to say no,



Protesters hold up a Rape Crisis Center banner at a rally in London's Trafalgar Square. Activists have urged reform of Britain's tradition-bound justice system.

he said, but when she goes into a man's bedroom late at night after they have both been drinking, juries may have a hard time voting to send a man to prison.

Fuad declined to speak about specific cases, but he said he has been surprised by some "not guilty" verdicts. He said jurors have been shown compelling evidence — such as blood at the scene or internal injury to the woman — and still not returned a guilty verdict.

It is illegal in Britain to interview jurors — even after a verdict. But public opinion polls show that a sizable proportion — a quarter to a third — of Britons say a rape victim is responsible for the attack if she is drunk or wearing "sexy" clothes.

"As many as one in two young men believe there are some circumstances when it's okay to force a woman to have sex," said Conservative Party leader David Cameron, citing studies.

"In my mind," he said, "this is an example of moral collapse."

'Let Down by the System'

Around the world, rapists are rarely punished. In the United States, 13 percent of rape reports end in a conviction. In many developing and Muslim countries,

women's activists say many victims don't even report gang or stranger rapes because it is so difficult to win convictions. Reporting has even led to victims being charged with adultery or sentenced to public lashings for "mingling" with men.

In wealthier Western countries, women are told that this crime shouldn't be hidden and are counseled to take a stand against men who force them into unwanted sex.

"But what is the point," asked Davies, when in the end the prosecutor often has a poorly put-together case, the defense contends that the sex was consensual — at least mostly — and the jury is told to be sure beyond a reasonable doubt?

"When we do report it, we are completely let down by the system," she said.

Governments collect crime statistics differently and international comparisons are difficult, but England's conviction rate stands out as particularly low. That has led to calls to reform a tradition-bound judicial system where judges and attorneys in criminal courtrooms still wear white wigs.

Police, prosecutors and judges are increasingly being trained specifically to deal with sex crimes. Judges are being urged to allow wider use of expert testimony so that, for example, a rape trauma expert could explain why a victim might

delay reporting. Now, the defense often uses that delay to attack a victim's credibility.

Until a few months ago, prosecutors were barred from interviewing victims and met them only on the day of the trial.

Ken McDonald, the head of the Crown Prosecution Service, called this restriction "mad." He said it dated back centuries to the days when witnesses stuck straw in their shoes outside courtrooms to indicate their testimony could be bought.

'I Was Happy Before'

Linda Davies's daughter, who asked that her first name not be used, said her courtroom experience two years ago still keeps her awake at night, crying. The 5-foot-2, brown-haired student met the prosecutor minutes before the trial. She had no warning that the defense would insinuate that she had a tarnished reputation and agreed to the sex for pocket cash — and that the prosecutor wouldn't object.

She was floored when Judge Jonathan Van Der Werff, as recorded in a transcript, told the jury that the defendant was "in a way a man of good character" and that it should disregard her age, "in case it's worrying you." Now retired, Van Der

Werff declined an interview request.

The defendant, who is unemployed, never took the stand. The teenager said he had told her he was 19; police later told her he was 28.

The girl said in an interview that the man invited her to his apartment. "He told me he wanted to get his dog to take on a walk," she said, covering her face. She had initially thought he was nice and kissed him. But then, she said, "he told me he would do something really bad to me" if she refused sex. "I couldn't push him off and I was trying really hard," said the girl, who weighs 90 pounds.

She said she wished police had interviewed someone at the local supermarket where she stood sobbing after the attack, or had asked to see the store's video surveillance tapes.

"This has made me a different person," she said, her voice fading and her brown eyes looking into the distance. "I was happy before. Now I am angry."

"I feel I didn't get justice. If I ever have kids and this happened to them, I wouldn't tell them to report it."



Researchers Jill Colvin and Karla Adam in London and staff researcher Robert E. Thomason in Washington contributed to this report.

Searching for Freedom, Chained by the Law

Story and Photos by MARY JORDAN

RAWALPINDI, Pakistan — Naheed Arshad, her bright green head scarf framing dull, brown eyes, had just endured nine months in prison on a charge of adultery. “My husband accused me of having an affair,” said Arshad, 35, her hand covering her mouth as she spoke quietly of the serious criminal charge that has disgraced her.

After a judge acquitted her in May, she joined thousands of other women living in a growing network of government and private shelters. She spends her days cooking, sewing and sad; despite the judge’s verdict, the shame of the charge has narrowed her already-limited options in life.

It is rare for a Pakistani woman accused of having illicit sex to talk publicly or allow herself to be photographed. But Arshad spoke freely about once taboo subjects, saying repeatedly, “I have done nothing wrong.”

“Why do I suffer?” Arshad asked. “It is just not fair.”

Increasing numbers of Pakistani women are becoming aware of gender inequities, a trend emerging in many other parts



Naheed Arshad, 35, was accused of adultery by her husband and imprisoned for nine months before she was declared innocent.

of the developing world as the communications revolution brings cellphones, satellite television and the Internet to the poorest villages. In this South Asian country of 167 million, a key issue is laws and

customs governing sexual conduct that sometimes date back centuries.

"More women are aware of their rights," said Naeem Mirza, program director for the Aurat Foundation, a leading women's rights organization. As more women join the workforce and assert their independence, he said, there is growing conflict between men and women.

The friction is especially evident in the use of laws that criminalize sex outside marriage. Husbands angry at wives who want a divorce, and parents angry at daughters who reject their choice of a husband, are yearly filing hundreds of criminal complaints of illegal sexual behavior, according to legal aid lawyers.

"Husbands and brothers are using these laws to take revenge on women" who are not behaving as they want, said Noor Alam Khan, a lawyer who represents prisoners in Peshawar in northwest Pakistan. "Maybe one in 100 charges are true," he said.

A recent study by the Aurat Foundation found that about three times a day somewhere in Pakistan, relatives file complaints with police alleging that a daughter or wife has been "abducted with the intent of illicit sexual relations," one of the various laws governing sexual behavior. Mirza said that in many of these cases, the

woman in question has left the house on her own free will.

Men are also arrested on illicit sex charges, but human rights lawyers say that the laws' impact is typically harder on women. The stigma attached to having an affair is far greater for a woman, and even an accusation of such behavior can mark her for life.

The aim of these charges is often not a successful prosecution, said Hina Jilani, one of the nation's leading female lawyers and founder of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Rather, she said, "it's to harass and intimidate women."

"Even if a woman is finally acquitted," Mirza said, "the price she pays through social retribution and honor is heavy."

'I Should Have Choices'

Farazana Zahir, a 20-year-old woman from Lahore, said she was forced to marry her cousin — a common traditional practice — and now wants a divorce.

"I strongly believe I should have choices — of whom I marry, how I spend my time," she said in an interview.

After seeing a television ad placed by a local female legislator offering help to women, she called the woman's office and was put in touch with legal aid attorneys.

Zahir needed a lawyer because her family told police she was “abducted” for sex by a man she met at a family party.

Zahir calls the charge a sham, retribution for her asking for a divorce, something women are traditionally not supposed to demand.

Men are allowed four wives in Pakistan, but women can have only one husband. Getting a divorce is harder for women. A wife must petition the court while a husband can end his marriage by simply saying “I divorce thee” three times.

“If I were a boy, this wouldn’t be hap-

pening,” Zahir said, an olive-colored head scarf pulled over her young, determined face. “But I am going to divorce.”

As she sat in the busy Lahore law offices of Jilani and her sister, Asma Jahangir, two dozen other women waited in the corridor. Many were seeking divorces; others were fighting criminal cases they said arose from conflicts with husbands or parents. Some were older and wore black veils; most were young and wore head scarves in bright oranges, reds or floral patterns.

Women interviewed there said men complain they are being influenced by



Farazana Zahir, left, meets with her lawyer, Alia Malik. Zahir, 20, was forced to marry and now wants a divorce.

promiscuous Western ideas. But the women say they are hardly looking for the lifestyle depicted in Hollywood movies. One young woman mentioned "Sex and the City" — available on the black market here — with obvious horror.

"Why can't I talk to a boy?" asked Rashida Khan, 17, a student interviewed in Islamabad. "Why are my brothers allowed outside in the evenings and I am not? All I want is more freedom."

Traditional Laws

The Muslim clerics and conservative politicians who most vocally support Pakistan's laws governing sexual morality argue that they are protecting traditions and guarding against what they call the "free sex" culture of unwed mothers and widespread divorce in the United States, Britain and other countries.

Maulana Rahat Hussain, a senator in the Pakistani Parliament from the religious party Jamiat e Ulema e Islam, said in an interview that the laws criminalizing extramarital sex also defend God's will: "Islam has its special laws about adultery and extramarital sex, and nobody has the authority to bring any sort of change in those laws."

When asked if the laws came down

harder on women than men, the senator said, "Many good laws can be misused."

He dismissed critics of the laws as "non-profits and Westernized women working for so-called women rights." These people, he said, were motivated by "getting funds from international donors and invitations for free foreign trips."

Nazir Afzal, a top British legal expert on "honor" crimes in which men have killed daughters and sisters for flirting or dating, said it is not only older people who believe that women must hold to a different standard in sexual conduct. He said a young man had explained his reasoning this way: "A man is like a piece of gold and woman a piece of silk. If you drop gold into the mud you can polish it clean, but if you drop silk into mud, it's stained forever."

In 1979, military dictator Gen. Mohammed Zia ul-Haq enacted the Hudood Ordinance, a set of laws based on a strict interpretation of the Koran that included laws on rape, adultery and sex before marriage. By 2006, under pressure from human and women's rights groups at home and abroad, Parliament amended the laws. The most notable change was that women alleging rape were no longer required to provide four male witnesses, a virtually impossible task.

But at the same time, conservative religious factions succeeded in inserting into the penal code laws against “fornication,” including the “abductions for sex” charge.

“These laws opened up abuses against women that we were trying to close,” said Jilani, who has argued cases before Pakistan’s Supreme Court.

Confined

In a busy, noisy neighborhood of Rawalpindi, Arshad, the woman jailed for adultery, now lives in a shelter with guards out front and bars on the doors and windows.

Judges send women here after their court proceedings to make sure they have a place to live that keeps them safe from enraged husbands or brothers. But the women can be virtual prisoners, forbidden to go out.

More than 1,000 women live in these provincial government-run shelters, many of which have opened in the past two years.

Last year, more than 3,000 women sought help at a separate network of facilities, the national government’s Benazir Bhutto Women Centers, recently renamed after the late female former prime minister who was assassinated in this city in

December. In 2005, there were 10 of these centers for women fleeing abusive homes. Today, there are 25, and the federal government said it plans to raise the number to 55 in coming months.

Arshad is from a village outside Rawalpindi, a busy city of about 3 million people best known as headquarters of the Pakistani army.

Even if she could get out, she said, she could not visit her home village because she feels threatened by her husband and brother. So she spends her days sitting on the shelter floor learning embroidery, peeling vegetables for dinner, watching TV and worrying about the future.

She said her misery began at 14, when her mother insisted she marry her first cousin, who was five years older. “My mother said he had no one to make bread for him, no one to look after him,” she said.

She said she protested that she was “too small” to be a wife but was given no choice. They married. He complained that she was not working enough and was going out of the house too much, and beat her, she said.

As the years passed, she said, she grew less tolerant of him. Then one day, he accused her of having an affair with their children’s teacher, which she denies.

Her home village is located at the end of a narrow, zigzag path in lush green fields. Her husband, Arshad Mehmood, 40, lives with their three children in a small house made of mud and bricks.

In an interview, he insisted his wife did have an affair with the prayer leader of the village mosque.

"She has committed a mistake, and she has been punished for that," he said. Mehmood said he, his brothers and his wife's brother all searched for her with the police, and when his wife and the teacher were found together, they were jailed.

"I am even now ready to accept her and allow her to live along with her children in this same house," he said. "But she is not willing to return."

A tall, slender man with a mustache, he interrupted a game of netball — a sport similar to basketball — to speak to a reporter. He said he has treated her fairly and did not beat her. Men and women are equal, he added, but women have a duty to manage their homes and "stay within the four walls."

Back within the worn shelter's walls where she is now confined, Arshad cried when shelter director Tallat Shabbier asked whether she was considering returning to her husband for the sake of her children. "I will never go back to him," she


said, dabbing her eyes with her green scarf. "Jail was better than being with him."

She has no way of seeing her young boys unless she returns to her husband, no money and little opportunity to start over at 35. Most people in Pakistan do not deem it socially acceptable for a woman to live alone outside the home of their family or husband.

According to shelter rules, women can be released only if they return to their husband, marry another man (often in ceremonies held inside the shelter) or are turned over to a blood relative.

"But my family is so cruel, and I will not marry again," she said. She has initiated divorce proceedings.

Sounding in turns defeated and defiant, Arshad said she would like to find a job, perhaps living in a house where she could clean or sew. But Shabbier shook her head. That was not option; women are to live with husbands or family, she said, reminding her of "social constraints."

As a fan whirled overhead in stifling summer heat, Arshad sat and repeated the one thing that to her was certain: "I will not go back to my husband." 

Special correspondents Shaiq Hussain in Islamabad and Imtiaz Ali in Peshawar contributed to this report.

A British Diplomat's Mission of Rescue

Story by MARY JORDAN

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Helen Rawlins climbed into her Toyota Land Cruiser at 7:30 in the morning, off to rescue another woman. The British diplomat settled into the back seat as she whizzed by the baking bustle of the Pakistani countryside: the women in colorful head scarves sitting in three-wheeled rickshaws, donkey carts piled high with mangoes, and elaborately painted buses where women sit apart from men.

Rawlins knew a tense confrontation awaited. Lately, she had been making a trip such as this once a week — to help British women of Pakistani descent lured to this country and forced, sometimes at gunpoint, into marriage.

The British government views forced marriages, often performed after beatings or threats of violence, as a human rights abuse, far different from arranged marriages to which the bride and groom consent.

It is Rawlins's job to stop them. In an age of increasingly fluid migration, and aided by instant communication, the British diplomat works 3,700 miles from London to help women from her own country.

On this June day, the victim was 21. A friend of hers called a British Embassy hotline, and Rawlins then exchanged clandestine text messages and telephone calls with the woman. Now she was on her way to take her back.

"She was very, very clear she wants out of here," said Rawlins, looking cool in a proper navy blue suit, despite the near-100-degree heat.

A security agent with a face wrinkled by years and sun, his gun hidden underneath a flowing white tunic, followed Rawlins's car in a white pickup truck.

Rawlins's cellphone rang.

She was still more than an hour away from the woman's village when she re-



BY KEVIN SULLIVAN — THE WASHINGTON POST



BY MARY JORDAN — THE WASHINGTON POST

A 17-year-old girl born and raised in Scotland, left, awaits a flight to London after seeking refuge at the British Embassy from her parents, who had brought her to Pakistan to marry. Above, the girl is reunited in East London with her Pakistani boyfriend, who had wired money to pay for her flight back to Britain.

ceived word of another emergency: A 17-year-old girl, born and raised in Scotland, had taken shelter in the British High Commission, as the embassy is known in this former colony.

Rawlins listened as the British offi-

cial explained the details. The girl said she hadn't realized that her parents had brought her to Pakistan to marry. She wanted to choose her own life. She has a boyfriend back home in Britain.

Her mother, furious and wailing, had

followed her. She was demanding to see her daughter. But the girl was refusing to talk to her, terrified her family might kill her. They had already taken her passport.

In Britain, girls of Pakistani descent, many of them first-generation British citizens, are raised in a Western country where women dress, date and marry as they please. Some rebel against the traditions of their parents' homeland, where liquor is banned, women cover their heads, and it is scandalous for unmarried women to talk to men who are not their relatives.

No culture or religion endorses forced marriages, but parents often see it as a way of defending their traditions. Marriage to a first cousin or someone from the family's home village is viewed as a way to preserve family honor, prevent marriage outside their religion and keep wealth within the family.

So parents bring their daughters to Pakistan, revealing their true intentions only after they arrive. By then, the girls are surrounded by family, with no place to turn and the threat of violence if they resist.

Before 2000, British officials tended to view forced marriages as a foreign custom not theirs to judge. But these British-raised young women are increasingly

NUPTIALS BY FORCE

■ Forced marriage is not officially sanctioned by any culture or religion.

■ The British government's Forced Marriage Unit receives more than 4,000 calls a year.

■ Hundreds of British citizens are forced into marriages each year. Some wed in Britain, some overseas. Many are citizens of both Britain and their ancestral countries.

■ Most involve families from the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. But many come from other parts of Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

■ Parents often force daughters to marry a cousin or someone else from the family's home village. This tradition prevents marriage outside the religion and culture, and ensures that property and wealth remain within a family.

■ Most victims are women, sometimes as young as 13, but occasionally they are men. In many of the societies where forced marriage occurs, men are permitted more than one wife, but women are allowed one husband and are stigmatized if they divorce.

■ Women who refuse have been killed, maimed, beaten or held prisoner in their home by their family, who regard this as upholding family honor.

SOURCE: British government

worldly and assertive, and many now have cellphones hidden in their burqas or handbags.

From even the remotest villages, they are increasingly calling for help. And the British government has set up a special group to rescue them.

The Forced Marriage Unit operates out of an office on the edge of Trafalgar Square in London and rescues hundreds of women every year. Many of the 4,000 calls it receives each year involve cases in the United Kingdom, but the unit has diplomats in embassies around the world on standby for overseas rescues.

Rawlins heads the team in Pakistan, which handles about two-thirds of the cases reported outside Britain. It operates with the consent of Pakistani authorities.

On the phone, Rawlins talked about the teenage girl, who, like other women interviewed for this article, are not identified out of concern for their safety and as a condition of riding along with British officials. Rawlins conferred with her colleague Albert David, who sat in the SUV's front seat wearing Ray-Bans and a crisp dress shirt. David, 38, a Pakistani, has worked on hundreds of these cases.

"We have to get her out of the country quickly," David said.

The girl's boyfriend in London, des-

perate to stop the marriage, arranged to have friends drive her to the embassy after she sneaked out of her family's home. In retaliation, the family filed kidnapping charges with the Pakistani police, who threw the boyfriend's Pakistani father and brother in jail, a blunt tactic to force the girl to comply.

Rawlins dialed her office. She needed an emergency passport for the girl. And plane reservations. She called London to ask for money; the girl must pay for her flight, but the government would lend cash if she needed it.

'This Is a Family Matter'

Along the road, Rawlins's face clouded as she read a new text message. It was from the woman they were on their way to rescue. "My parents have come around so you don't need to come today," the text read, "Sorry for the bother."

"Something is not right," Rawlins said. "She was absolutely clear about wanting to get out."

She texted a response: "We need to speak in person. We are already on the way. We can either come to the house or meet somewhere else."

Rawlins, 43, operates with quiet efficiency and attention to detail. A ca-

reer diplomat, she is bright and serious, practical and thorough. Even her haircut makes sense — close-cropped in the intense summer heat.

“I wouldn’t want to be doing the same job every day for 20 years,” Rawlins said. “Here we have a chance to help people.”

She said she “manages the risk” with planning. “I don’t want to put the victims or my staff at risk,” she said. “But it’s true that you can’t control everything.”

A few days before, the windows had been blown out of her house; eight people were killed in a bombing at the nearby Danish Embassy.

On roads where donkeys weaved between buses, Rawlins headed northeast to Mirpur, a district where most of the million Pakistanis living in Britain have their roots.

One of the world’s biggest dams was built in Mirpur in the 1960s, and Britain gave visas to 5,000 people whose land was swallowed by water.

Immigration snowballed after that, and now nearly everyone in Mirpur has a relative in Britain. On any given day, an estimated 80,000 British citizens are living in or visiting Pakistan, many of whom have built large homes in Mirpur.

Though they embrace Britain’s economic opportunities, many of these

working-class immigrants reject a culture they see as polluted by alcohol, promiscuity and divorce. Parents who force their girls to marry a relative or local man say they are resisting that Western influence, a move that enhances their status in the community.

More practically, it also makes it easier for another person in their close circle to get a visa to Britain, where taxi drivers earn many times more than lawyers do here.

Rawlins sent another message. Still no reply.

David tried another tack. He called the woman’s boyfriend, who had helped him locate her. The couple had met in the Middle East, and both had since returned to Pakistan.

“It is her boyfriend who has changed her mind,” David said, shaking his head. If they married here in Pakistan — and she didn’t leave for Britain now — it would be easier for him to get British residency.

Nobody, it seemed to him and Rawlins, had this woman’s best interests at heart.

The SUV wound down a rocky path to a one-story house with a dirt courtyard behind an iron gate.

Rawlins and David walked up to the house. Four men working outside a

neighbor's house glared at the strangers in Western clothes.

A thin man in a loose-fitting, blue salwar-kameez strode toward them.

"Who called these people?" he shouted in a thick British accent.

"We just want to talk to her," Rawlins said to the woman's brother.

"Everyone knows these cars," he shouted, upset that this visit would cause him embarrassment in the village. "This is a family matter."

After a bit of diplomatic coaxing, he calmed down. Rawlins and David asked to speak privately with the woman, draped in a red head scarf and tunic. Her mother stood nearby, crying and screaming.

In private, the woman agreed to go with Rawlins and David, saying she wanted to escape the pressure from her family. She had already packed a suitcase, and the security guard carried it to the SUV.

But she still seemed conflicted. If she stepped into the Land Cruiser, she would likely never see her family again.

She called her boyfriend and spoke in hushed tones. When she hung up, she told Rawlins she had changed her mind. She wanted to stay "one more day" to work things out.

Rawlins asked if she was sure, and she nodded.

The guard silently fetched her suitcase and brought it back inside.

Back in the SUV, Rawlins let out a long breath, her frustration obvious. Rawlins said her main worry is what happens "to girls left behind." Those who enter into forced marriages are often beaten and forced to have sex. Those who divorce are stigmatized — or even killed.

Driving away from the house, Rawlins said she would try to keep in touch with the woman. But families often take away girls' phones, and it would be harder next time.

"I think it was the wrong decision," Rawlins said. "But we don't force anyone to do anything."

A Predawn Flight Home

The SUV rolled back into Islamabad in the late afternoon and pulled up outside the office of Khalida Salimi, a vivacious woman who runs a shelter for women fleeing violence and forced marriages.

"This is a male-dominated society," Salimi said. "Women have not attained the status of human beings; they are still considered commodities, possessions."

The 17-year-old Scottish girl who had taken refuge in the British Embassy was on her way to the shelter.

Her boyfriend in London — whom she met by chance at a restaurant counter — had already wired money for a flight. She was booked to leave for London at 4:40 a.m., in just a few hours.

Working his cellphone, David smoothed things over with the Pakistani police, arranging for release of the boyfriend's father and brother. He would personally go to the airport, despite the hour, to ensure that the girl walked safely onto the plane.

Rawlins headed off in the SUV, more messages waiting. Two more women needed help.

The teenage girl sat in Salimi's office, wearing a black niqab that covered everything but her sad brown eyes.

"I don't want to hide; I want to be free, open," she said in a pronounced Scottish accent. She said she usually wears jeans.

Lowering her niqab enough to reveal her long, dark hair and pretty earrings, she said she is scared of her family. Her brothers, she said, had already beaten up one of her friends because of her, and she believed they would kill her for shaming the family.



PAKISTAN'S FORCED

MARRIAGES: Women's rights activists discuss the situation of women in their country who are forced to wed at

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/womansworld>.

"My father would shoot me before letting me go," she said. "My parents say things are screwed up in the U.K., so they want me to marry a guy from here, who doesn't drink and smoke."

"My boyfriend is even a Muslim and from Pakistan, but they don't accept him," she continued. "I am British, but I am Pakistani, too. But why shouldn't I get to decide whom I marry?"

She looked tired, and she bent over several times complaining of stomach cramps. The pressure of recent days had been too much.

"I have left everyone, everything," she said. "I have not been a bad person to anyone. I don't know why this happened to me."

At 9 p.m., she lay down in one of the shelter's beds and pulled a clean, flow-ered blanket over her.

"When I get home, I will feel better," she said, hoping for a few hours of sleep before the long journey ahead.



In Egypt, Some Women Say That Veils Increase Harassment

Story by MARY JORDAN

CAIRO — In a Muslim country where the numbers of women wearing the veil are rising, and so — by most accounts — are incidents of groping and catcalls in the streets, the message in ads circulating anonymously in e-mails here in Egypt is clear: “A veil to protect, or eyes will molest,” one warns. The words sit over two illustrations, one comparing a veiled woman, her hair and neck covered in the manner known to Muslims as hijab, to a wrapped candy, untouched and pure.

The other picture shows an unveiled woman, hair flying wildly and hip jutting, next to a candy that has had its wrapper stripped off — and is now covered in flies.

“You can’t stop them, but you can protect yourself,” warns another ad likening men to flies and women to sweets. Bloggers in Egypt have taken to calling such messages the “veil your lollipop” campaign.

No group has asserted responsibility for the online ads, which so far have drawn little attention outside Egyptian blogs. But the campaign comes at a time of converging debate on two keenly felt

issues in Egypt: the growing social pressure on Muslim women to veil themselves; and the rising incidence of sexual harassment of women by strangers.

Surprisingly, some Egyptian women say that their veils don’t protect against harassment, as the lollipop ads argue, but fuel it. A survey released this summer supports the view.

“These guys are animals. If they saw a female dog, they would harass it,” Hind Sayed, a 20-year-old sidewalk vendor in Cairo’s Mohandisseen district, said, staring coldly at a knot of male vendors who stood grinning a few feet from her.

More Female British Tourists Were Harassed and Assaulted, Even Raped, While in Egypt Than in Any Other Country

In accord with her interpretation of Islamic law, which says women should dress modestly, Sayed wore a flowing black robe and black veil. Together, they covered all but her hands and her pale face with its drawn-on, expressive eyebrows. Despite her attire, Sayed said, she daily endures suggestive comments from male customers and fellow vendors.

“I think a woman who wears hijab can be more provocative to them,” Sayed said. “The more covered up you are, the more interesting you are to them.”

Zuhair Mohammed, a 60-year-old shopper on the same street, said she long ago stopped wearing the traditional Islamic covering, in part for that reason.

“I feel like with the hijab, it makes them wonder, ‘What are you hiding underneath?’” Mohammed said.

Mona Eltahawy, a 41-year-old Egyptian social commentator who now lives, unveiled, in the United States, said that as a Muslim woman who wore hijab for

nine years and was harassed “countless times” in Egypt, she has concluded that the increase in veiling has somehow contributed to the increase in harassment.

“The more women veil the less men learn to behave as decent and civilized members of society,” Eltahawy wrote in an interview via Facebook. “And the more women are harassed, the more they veil thinking it will ‘protect’ them.”

Female travelers consider Egypt one of the worst countries in the world for harassment on the streets — second only to Afghanistan, where the Taliban forced all women behind the veil and into seclusion in their homes.

And it's not just women's perceptions. The United States and Britain both warn female visitors in travel advisories that they may face unwanted attention, or sexual attacks, in Egypt.

When Egyptian lawmakers objected to Britain's advisory this summer, calling it a slur, Britain responded that more female British tourists were ha-

Women in Hijab Were Found to be the Most Frequent Targets of Unwanted Comments and Touching on the Street

harassed and assaulted, even raped, while in Egypt than in any other country.

A new survey by the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights makes harassment on the streets appear not a risk, but a virtual certainty. According to the center, 98 percent of the foreign women and 83 percent of the Egyptian women surveyed said they had been sexually harassed in the country.

About half of the women, Egyptian and non-Egyptian, said they were harassed every day as they went about the streets. The survey polled 2,020 Egyptian men and women and 109 non-Egyptian women.

Foreign women identified Egyptian policemen and other security officials as the most frequent harassers.

Two-thirds of the Egyptian men surveyed admitted to harassing women, in actions ranging from staring openly at their bodies, shouting explicit comments, touching the women or exposing themselves.

"It makes a woman happy when I

call to her. It makes her know she's attractive," 20-year-old Alla Aldin Salem said on the sidewalk in Mohandisseen, after going out of earshot of the glaring fellow vendor in hijab.

"The woman herself is the one who makes men harass her," said Fawzi Tahbet, a 50-year-old man selling kitchenware on another stretch of the sidewalk, under the shade of a tree. "If she's walking, swinging as she goes, of course it will happen."

In fact, the survey's results challenged a stereotype, according to Nehad Komsan, chairwoman of the women's rights center.

While both men and women surveyed said that short skirts and tight clothes triggered harassment, the survey found that women in hijab were the most frequent targets of unwanted comments and touching on the street.

Among Egyptian women, 72 percent of those who described incidents of harassment said they were veiled at the time.

An Estimated 80 Percent of Egyptian Women Now Wear Hijab

"It surprised me," said Komsan, who wears hijab. "It doesn't matter what you wear."

Egypt's most notorious case of harassment occurred last year when two fully veiled Gulf Arab women were surrounded by dozens of men on a street and molested.

Bystanders filmed the episode and posted it on YouTube. It became an embarrassment to Egypt's government and a spark for the first public debate on sexual harassment in Egypt. A female lawmaker now is pushing legislation that would allow jail sentences for some forms of sexual harassment and discrimination.


Anecdotes told by the women who were surveyed portrayed women choosing to give up jobs and education because of harassment, Komsan said. She presented Egyptian news media with the case of a 14-year-old girl who stopped going to school because of the harassment she suffered on a public bus during the daily trips to school and back. The girl's father had come to the women's rights center, seeking help in getting his daughter back to class.

An estimated 80 percent of Egyptian women now wear hijab. Pressure on the remainder to cover up grows every year, as fundamentalism gains influence in Muslim societies worldwide.

"Bravo, you've taken the veil," a popular Egyptian singer croons in one music video, which shows a previously neglectful boyfriend beaming and offering a wedding ring when his formerly uncovered girlfriend dons a head scarf.

Veiling parties laud girls who've covered up. Egyptian women who don't wear hijab say that, more and more, they encounter strangers urging them in the streets, "Sister, you'd be more beautiful if you veiled."

At the women's rights center, Komsan recounted a few of the many reasons, in addition to religion, that prompt women to veil: rebellion against a less openly devout older generation; a desire to demonstrate Islamic solidarity; a desire to show oneself a good girl who would make a good wife.

Asked how many women also wore the veil in hopes of protecting against harassment, Komsan smiled. "Most," she said. 

Women Run the Show In a Recovering Rwanda

Story and Photo by STEPHANIE MCCRUMMEN

KIGALI, Rwanda — On a continent that has been dominated by the rule of men, this tiny East African nation is trying something new. Here, women are not only driving the economy — working on construction sites, in factories and as truck and taxi drivers — they are also filling the ranks of government.

Women hold a third of all cabinet positions, including foreign minister, education minister, Supreme Court chief and police commissioner general. And Rwanda's parliament last month became the first in the world where women claim the majority — 56 percent, including the speaker's chair.

One result is that Rwanda has banished archaic patriarchal laws that are still enforced in many African societies, such as those that prevent women from inheriting land. The legislature has passed bills aimed at ending domestic violence and child abuse, while a committee is now combing through the legal code to purge it of discriminatory laws.

One lawmaker said the committee

has compiled “a stack” of laws to modify or toss out altogether — including one that requires a woman to get her husband's signature on a bank loan.

“The fact that we are so many has made it possible for men to listen to our views,” said lawmaker Espérance Mwiza. “Now that we're a majority, we can do even more.”

The unusually high percentage of women in Rwandan government is in part a reflection of popular will in a country of 10 million that is 55 percent female.

But it also reflects the heavy hand of one man, President Paul Kagame, whose photo hangs on the walls of houses, restaurants and shops. It also hovered over the swiveling leather chair of parlia-



Rwanda's parliament is the world's first where women hold a majority — 56 percent, including the speaker's chair.

ment speaker Rose Mukantabana as she opened a session late last week.

Since the 1994 genocide, in which more than 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in 100 days of highly organized violence that included the systematic rape of Tutsi women, Kagame, a Tutsi, has enforced a kind of zealous social engineering.

With a population that was about 70 percent female after the genocide, Kagame's new government adopted ambitious policies to help women economically and politically, including a new constitution in 2003 requiring that

at least 30 percent of all parliamentary and cabinet seats go to women. The remaining 26 percent of the women in parliament were indirectly elected.

"This was a broken society after the genocide," said Aloisea Inyumba, Kagame's former gender and social affairs minister, who was also a prominent official in his ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front when it was still a rebel group fighting the country's genocidal government. "We made a decision that if Rwanda is going to survive, we have to have a change of heart as a society. Equality and reconciliation are the only options."

While many African legislatures have adopted quotas reserving seats for female lawmakers, none has done so as ambitiously as Rwanda. The country's overall attitude toward gender puts it at odds with its neighbors.

Just next door, an epidemic of sexual violence has ravaged eastern Congo, where law and order have almost completely broken down. In the run-up to Kenyan elections last year, several female candidates were beaten and threatened with sexual violence. One was murdered. Out of the legislature's 222 lawmakers, 21 are women.

In this hilly and green capital city, meanwhile, women successfully lob-

bied for the removal of a statue in a central roundabout that depicted a woman holding a jug of water on her head and a baby on her hip.

In its place came a more neutral one: a smiling woman free of the jug, holding the hand of a little boy walking alongside her.

Not far away is the parliament building, where rows of women took their seats last Thursday, and listened to the finance minister present the midterm national budget.

Afterward came questions from women such as Bernadette Kanzayire, who was a practicing lawyer before she became a politician, or Suzanne Mukayijore, who once worked in banking. And then there was Ignacienne Nyirarukundo, who went to work for Rwanda's national reconciliation commission after surviving the genocide. She then worked on children's welfare issues, and decided to run for office this year, campaigning on a platform of eradicating poverty through reduced birth rates.

"I felt I could do better helping to build my country in parliament," said Nyirarukundo, 39.

Other female lawmakers are Hutu or Tutsi, genocide survivors or former refugees who grew up in Uganda, Burundi



or Tanzania. They come from different parties, though opposition to Kagame is not exactly vigorous.

In the recent parliament session, lawmakers asked the finance minister about the impact of the global financial crisis on Rwanda's budget, the gap between exports and imports and the soundness of Rwanda's booming mortgage market. Just one question — about funding for maternal and child health — was gender-specific.

Sitting in her office later, Kanzayire spoke diplomatically about “working with men” and seemed sensitive to the joke going around that soon, Rwanda will need affirmative action for men.

Though profound tensions and scars from the genocide still exist here, so does a strong sense of national purpose tinged with unapologetic political correctness.

It is taboo to speak of Hutus or Tutsis these days; everyone is Rwandan. The last Saturday of every month is community work day, when neighbors gather for six hours to help with a collective project — clearing brush, or repairing a less-fortunate neighbor's house.

“We are doing this for ourselves — not because it's a law,” said Beatrice Namyonga, who was clearing weeds with her neighbors.

When it comes to the role of women, a similar attitude prevails.

In general, men here seem to have accepted and even embraced the policy of promoting women in government, even if their endorsement at times carries a dutiful tone.

“It was the government's aim to promote women, and the biggest proportion of Rwandans are women,” said Jean Muhikira, 49, a driver who said he notices many more women in his line of work these days. “Women can contribute a lot in ideas.”

In some quarters of Rwandan society — particularly among older men and Hutu men who harbor some mistrust of Kagame's government — the policy is viewed with faint suspicion.

“Maybe now that women have more than 50 percent in parliament, it could be a big problem,” said Thomas Habumuisha, 29, who was out shopping with a friend on Saturday. “Maybe women could take advantage and oppress men.”

His friend, Muhire Bitorwa, whose wife, a teacher, is helping pay his way through Kigali University, nodded politely, but disagreed.

“In my view, women are more reasonable, more merciful and less corrupt than men,” he offered. “And culturally, women have not been recognized.” 