

How Christian and Hindu girls are enslaved for debt payment every year in Pakistan

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Islamabad: In a growing market of buying and selling the girls, many of the Christian and Hindu girls gets enslaved for debt payment every year in Pakistan.

In these markets women like Ameri and her young daughter are treated as property: taken as payment for a debt, to settle disputes, or as revenge if a landowner wants to punish his worker. Sometimes parents, burdened by an unforgiving debt, even offer their daughters as payment.

The girl called Jeevti was just 14 when she taken from her family in the night to be married off to a man who says her family owed him \$1,000 (Rs. 67,831).

Her mother, Ameri Kashi Kohli, is sure that her daughter paid the price for a never-ending debt.

Ameri says she and her husband borrowed roughly \$500 (Rs. 33914) when they first began to work on the land, but she throws up her hands and says the debt was repaid.

It's a familiar story here in southern Pakistan: Small loans balloon into impossible debts, bills multiply, payments are never deducted.

The women are like trophies to the men. They choose the prettiest, the young and pliable. Sometimes they take them as second wives to look after their homes. Sometimes they use them as prostitutes to earn money.

Sometimes they take them simply because they can.

"I went to the police and to the court. But no one is listening to us," says Ameri, who is Hindu. She says the land manager made her daughter convert to Islam and took the girl as his second wife. "They told us, 'Your daughter has committed to Islam and you can't get her back.'"

More than 2 million Pakistanis live as "modern slaves," according to the 2016 Global Slavery Index, which ranks Pakistan in the top three offending countries that still enslave people, some as farm workers, others at brick kilns or as household staff. Sometimes the workers are beaten or chained to keep them from fleeing.

"They have no rights, and their women and girls are the most vulnerable," says Ghulam Hayder, whose Green Rural Development Organization works to free Pakistan's bonded laborers.

An estimated 1,000 young Christian and Hindu girls, most of them underage and impoverished, are taken from their homes each year, converted to Islam and married, said a report by the South Asia Partnership organization.

Hayder says, "They always take the pretty ones."

The night Jeevti disappeared, the family had slept outside, the only way to endure the brutal summer heat here in southern Sindh province. In the morning, she was gone. No one heard anything, her mother says.

The family turned to activist Veero Kohli to help free the girl.

Kohli, who isn't related to the family, was born a slave. Since fleeing bondage in 1999, she has devoted herself to challenging Pakistan's powerful landowners, liberating thousands of families from bonded labor.

Kohli's defiance incenses many men in a country dominated by a centuries-old patriarchal culture.

"I know that they would like to kill me, but I will never stop fighting to free these people," she says.

Five months ago, she went with Ameri to the Piyaro Lundh police station to find her daughter. They said the girl went willingly, Kohli says.

"I told them: 'Let me talk to her. Let her mother talk to her if she went freely.'" They refused.

Instead, they called in the man who Ameri said had taken her daughter. Hamid Brohi, came alone, without the girl.

"He said, 'Anyway, she is payment for 100,000 rupees (\$1,000) they owe me,'" Kohli recalls.

Now Kohli is returning to the same police station, where police officer Aqueel Ahmed thumbs through a dozen files, barely containing his anger at the activist.

- (With inputs from AP)