



Maira Shahbaz aged 14

Aid to the Church in Need reports:

May 19th, 2020 PAKISTAN: Christian girl, 14, abducted during lockdown

A mother in Pakistan has spoken of her distress after a man struck while the country was in lockdown, abducting the woman's 14-year-old daughter, forcing her to marry him and abandon her Christian faith.

Faisalabad Magistrates Court ruled in favour of Mohamad Nakash, who claimed that Catholic girl Maira Shahbaz is 19 in spite of evidence being produced to show she is five years younger including a birth certificate, as well as official church and school documents.

Maira's mother, Nighat, was rushed to hospital in Faisalabad suffering shock after two witnesses, Parvaiz and Nadeem Masih, described how at about 2pm on 28th April Mr Nakash and two accomplices – all bearing arms – bundled the 14-year-old into a car near her home, firing shots into the air as they drove off.

Speaking to Aid to the Church in Need, a Catholic charity for persecuted Christians, shortly after being discharged from hospital, Nighat said: "I beg that my daughter be returned to us. I am frightened that I will never see her again."

ACN, which supports people accused of blasphemy in Pakistan Pakistan with legal and paralegal aid, also spoke to Maira's older sister, Saira, 16, who said: **"Maira is still a child and has been taken advantage of. She loves singing and I miss her and her singing so much."**

The family's lawyer, Khalil Tahir Sandhu, said that Mr Nakash is already married with two children and came across Maira as he lives not far from her home near Madina Town, where he works as a barber.

Mr Sandhu said that in court Mr Nakash produced fabricated documents allegedly showing that he and Maira had married last October when she was still 13.

The lawyer, a Catholic, who had for several years been a college room-mate of assassinated Pakistan minority rights campaigner and minister Shahbaz Bhatti, said: **"The people who do this kind of thing to a young child like Maira treat us not as human beings but as if we're animals."**

The case of the abducted Pakistani Christian girl Maira Shahbaz aged 14

He said that during the court hearing, on 5th May, Faisalabad magistrate Kamran Khalid had been swayed by up to 150 men who gathered at the court to support Mr Nakash.

Mr Sandhu said he would appeal the decision, taking the case to Lahore High Court and if necessary Pakistan's Supreme Court, which in October 2018 sensationally overturned the case of Asia Bibi, the Christian woman on death row for blasphemy.

ACN also spoke to Lala Robin Daniel, a human rights activist, friend and neighbour of Maira and her family, who said: **"The Shahbaz family is one of the poorest in Madina Town. What little they earn is from their work as cleaners.**

"The father has left them and in our society, this poor Christian family are very vulnerable."

The family explained that Maira had to leave school early because the family could no longer afford the fees and instead she got a job.

About 1,000 Christian and Hindu women and girls are abducted every year in Pakistan, according to the Movement for Solidarity and Peace, a human rights organisation in the country.

ACN has supported the case of another 14-year-old Christian girl, Huma Younus, who, according to family, was abducted from her parents' home in Karachi last October by a man named Abdul Jabbar.

June 3rd, 2020 PAKISTAN: Family of abducted girl, 14, take case to High Court

A Christian family in Pakistan have gone to the High Court in their fight to win back their 14-year-old girl, who they say was abducted by a man who forced her to marry him and demanded she abandon her faith.

Lawyer Khalil Tahir Sandhu confirmed to Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) that yesterday (Tuesday, 2nd June) he submitted a petition to Lahore High Court Chief Justice Muhammad Qasim Khan to appeal the case of Maira Shahbaz.

The family want to overturn the ruling of Faisalabad Magistrates' Court which on 5th May declared that Catholic girl Maira is 19 and, as such, is validly wedded to Muslim man Mohamad Nakash, who is already married with two young children.

Witnesses described how on 28th April Maira was walking close to her home in Madina Town, near Faisalabad, when Mr Nakash and two armed accomplices drew up in a car, abducted her and fired guns into the air as they made off at speed.

Mr Sandhu told ACN: "I am trying my very best for the case. Maira's mother [Nighat Shahbaz] is so very sad – in fact she is a picture of sadness.

"You cannot imagine the shock of losing your daughter and losing all contact with her."

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He said that when Nighat Shahbaz saw her daughter at last month's magistrates' court hearing, she collapsed and was rushed to hospital with a heart attack. She is making a slow recovery.

Mr Sandhu said: **"The case for Maira being a minor is very strong. There are so many gaps and weaknesses in the opponent's argument."**

He cites a birth certificate and other official documentation from her local church and school to prove that Maira is 14.

Mr Sandhu claims a marriage certificate Mr Nakash produced in court is a fake.

The document purports to show he wed the girl last October, when she was only 13.

Mr Nakash argues that, in spite of law, which forbids marriage to minors, marrying Maira is sanctioned by Islamic custom which, he claims, says it is valid, provided the girl has had her first period.

Mr Sandhu said: **"In cases like this what we so often see is that, after two or three years, the people send back the girl to the family by which time they have satisfied their lust and have had enough of her."**

Mr Sandhu, former Punjab Minister for Human Rights and Minority Affairs, pledged to raise Maira's case in the Punjab Assembly.

A one-time university room-mate of fellow Christian Shahbaz Bhatti, assassinated in 2011 while serving as Pakistan's federal minister for minorities, Mr Sandhu said: **"What motivates me is my faith in Jesus and I am reminded of the Gospel passage where Christ reveals how he has been sent to set the captives free."**

As a charity for persecuted and other suffering Christians, ACN supports the National Commission for Justice and Peace and other organisations in Pakistan which provide legal and paralegal aid for minorities and help for those forced into hiding.

July 3rd, 2020 PAKISTAN: Grand Mufti's Fatwa of hope

A Christian family in Pakistan fighting for the return of a 14-year-old girl reportedly abducted from her home have had their hopes raised after the Grand Mufti of a local mosque issued a fatwa.

Muhammad Asad Ali Rizvi Efi issued the Islamic ruling on behalf of the Sunni Rizvi Jammah Mosque, Jhung Bazar, Faisalabad, condemning as false (*batil*) a marriage certificate produced in court by Mohamad Nakash, who claims he is legally wedded to the abducted girl, Maira Shahbaz.

Faisalabad Magistrates' Court had decided in Mr Nakash's favour back in May but Maira's family hope the Grand Mufti's intervention will be crucial in an appeal hearing to be held at Lahore High Court.

The case of the abducted Pakistani Christian girl Maira Shahbaz aged 14

Speaking from her home in Madina Town, near Faisalabad, Maira's mother, Nighat Shahbaz, told Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), the Catholic charity for persecuted Christians, that she was longing for her daughter's return.

Mrs Shahbaz, who was rushed to hospital following a heart attack at May's Faisalabad court hearing, said: **"Every night at two in the morning, I wake and pray to the Lord that he will answer my prayers for Maira to be returned to us.**

"Nobody has the right to take a child from her family without the mother's permission. She has had her childhood, her youth and everything she knows taken away from her."

Lala Robin Daniel, family friend and Faisalabad-based human rights activist, who is campaigning for Maira's return, said: **"In terms of how the marriage is viewed within the Muslim community, the Grand Mufti's intervention is significant."**

Mr Daniel said: "The marriage certificate that Mr Nakash produced is undoubtedly fake.

"The signature from the imam solemnising the marriage is false, no mention is made of Mr Nakash's pre-existing marriage, there is no consent from the woman he is already married to – everything about it reveals it to be a fraud."

Mr Daniel said that, although police had made progress in tracing Mr Nakash, his precise whereabouts remained unknown and it is thought that he is in hiding.

Two Christian men stated they saw Mr Nakash and two accomplices, wielding firearms, kidnap Maira on the afternoon of 28th April 2020 – during coronavirus lockdown.

When the case was heard at Faisalabad Magistrates' Court, Mr Nakash claimed he had married Maira last October when the family state she was still only 13.

Mr Nakash claims Maira is 19 but the family have produced a birth certificate and official Church and school documents to prove she was born in 2005.

Family lawyer Khalil Tahir Sandhu has lodged a petition for the case to be heard on appeal at Lahore High Court but, with most justices on recess until September, a date has yet to be set.

July 30th, 2020, PAKISTAN: Breakthrough for Maira

A Christian mother in Pakistan has achieved a significant breakthrough in her struggle to win back her abducted 14-year-old daughter amid reports that she was being groomed to enter the sex industry.

Hearings have been scheduled for next week at Lahore High Court in the case of Catholic teenager Maira Shahbaz, from Madina Town, near Faisalabad, after a local court overturned an earlier ruling that sanctioned her alleged marriage to Mohamad Nakash.

Mr Nakash is accused of abducting her at gunpoint during COVID-19 lockdown in April and forcing her to convert to Islam.

The case of the abducted Pakistani Christian girl Maira Shahbaz aged 14

Ruling that Maira's birth certificate is proof that she was under-age at the time of her alleged marriage to Mr Nakash last October, Faisalabad District and Sessions Judge Rana Masood Akhtar ordered that the teenager leave the man's home and be placed in a women's refuge on condition she has no contact with family members.

The refuge, known as Dar ul Aman, is where Maira will reside until Lahore High Court gives a final verdict, which could result in the girl re-joining her mother, Nighat, and her siblings in the family home in Madina.

Meantime, a First Instance Report (FIR) has been issued against Mr Nakash, which, pending a ruling from Lahore High Court, could result in him being given a jail sentence.

Both Mr Nakash and two alleged accomplices are accused of abducting Maira.

Mr Nakash is also accused of presenting the court with a false marriage certificate.

The Muslim cleric quoted in the certificate has gone on record to deny involvement in the wedding and the document apparently fails to provide proof of consent from Mr Nakash's first wife, with whom he has two children.

But Mr Nakash has hit back, issuing an FIR against Maira's mother, Nighat Shahbaz, and family advocate Lala Daniel, whom he accuses of harassment.

In an interview with Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Mr Daniel said: "Developments over the past few days have been an answer to prayer and we are so grateful for everyone for their prayers in this case.

"But we need you to continue praying.

"Maira's mother is still very sad. Her health is weak and she misses Maira very much.

"If the police and the courts know that people in the West are paying attention they will be under more pressure to follow the law rather than give into extremist groups who are not favourable to Christians."

He described Maira's move from her abductor's home to the refuge as "a miracle", citing evidence that, had she stayed, she may have been forced to become a sex worker.

Lawyer Khalil Tahir Sandhu, who is representing Maira and the family in Lahore High Court, said: "In terms of evidence to prove Maira is under age, we are on very solid ground with a birth certificate and other official documents.

"I am hopeful of a good outcome."

August 4th, 2020 PAKISTAN: Maira – Calamity in the courtroom

The campaign to free a 14-year-old Christian girl from the clutches of a man who abducted her and held her hostage in his home in Pakistan lies in tatters after Lahore High Court unexpectedly decided in his favour.

The case of the abducted Pakistani Christian girl Maira Shahbaz aged 14

Judge Raja Muhammad Shahid Abbasi today (Tuesday, 4th August) overturned last week's ruling of the Faisalabad District and Sessions Court which ordered that Maira Shahbaz be removed from Mohamad Nakash's house and placed in a women and girl's refuge, pending further investigations.

Mr Nakash claimed he had married Maira but, in spite of evidence invalidating the marriage certificate and showing that she is underage, Lahore High Court ruled in his favour, stating that the teenager has embraced Islam.

Witnesses said Maira was in tears in the court today and afterwards her clearly distressed mother, Nighat, declined to speak to Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), the Catholic charity which has been closely following the case.

Family friend and advocate Lala Robin Daniel said: "With this ruling, no Christian girl in Pakistan is safe."

Lawyer Khalil Tahir Sandhu, who represented Maira in court, told ACN: "It is unbelievable. What we have seen today is an Islamic judgement.

"The arguments we put forward were very strong and cogent."

In the courtroom, Mr Tahir Sandhu detailed 11 arguments in support of his client, chief of which involves an official birth certificate showing Maira was only 13 last October, the month of her alleged marriage to Mr Nakash.

Mr Tahir Sandhu also argued that the marriage certificate was faked, citing evidence denouncing the document given by the Muslim cleric whose name appears on the document.

The lawyer also quoted from state law in Pakistan to show that, as Maira is underage, she can only change her religion with her mother's permission.

Mr Tahir Sandhu said: "I became so upset as the proceedings went on, I feared I might be asked to leave the court room."

The lawyer said he would appeal the decision, first at Lahore High Court and, if this fails, in the Supreme Court of Pakistan.

August 25th, 2020 PAKISTAN: Escape from the house of hell

A 14-year-old Christian girl has escaped from the man a High Court in Pakistan ruled to be her husband and has gone to the police to say that she was filmed while by being raped by him.

Maira Shahbaz, her mother, Nighat, and three siblings are on the run from Mohamad Nakash after the Catholic girl from Madina Town, Punjab Province, fled his home in nearby Faisalabad where sources close to the family say she was forced into prostitution.

According to Maira, Mr Nakash has threatened to kill both her and her family.

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The Catholic girl refuses to accept her forced conversion from Christianity, which she says she was tricked into doing by being pressured into signing blank papers.

She said her abductors warned that, if she did not comply with their demands, they would publish the video of her being raped online.

In an interview with Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Lala Robin Daniel, a friend of Maira's family, described life on the run, moving from place to place every few days, adding: "Maira is traumatised. She cannot speak. We want to take her to the doctor but we are afraid we might be spotted.

"We are all very frightened but we place our trust in God."

Maira's claims against Mr Nakash and his accomplices are set out in a statement she made to police, a copy of which has been issued to ACN by the family's lawyer, Khalil Tahir Sandhu.

Describing what happened after she was reportedly kidnapped at gunpoint in April, Maira states: "I found myself at an unknown place where the accused forced me to have a glass of juice that contained some intoxicant.

"I was semi-conscious at that moment and the accused raped me forcefully and also filmed me naked. When I came to my senses, I started shouting and requesting them to release me..."

"They threatened to murder my whole family. They have also shown me my naked video and pictures which they have taken on their mobile while raping me."

She continues: "My life was at stake in the hands of the accused and... Nakash repeatedly raped me forcefully."

The family are calling for Mr Nakash's arrest for sex crimes involving a minor and Mr Tahir Sandhu has applied to the courts both to cancel her marriage to him and her forced conversion.

In the meantime, Mr Nakash is calling for the arrest of Maira's mother, Nighat, her uncles and Mr Daniel, claiming they kidnapped the girl from his home.

It comes nearly three weeks after Lahore High Court ruled in Mr Nakash's favour in the case of the girl's alleged abduction on 28th April, when it is claimed he and two armed accomplices kidnapped her in broad daylight close to her home.

The family has consistently contested Mr Nakash's claims of marrying Maira, and in court Mr Tahir Sandhu produced an official birth certificate to show the girl was 13 at the time of the alleged ceremony last October.

The Muslim cleric named in the marriage certificate dismissed it as a fake and went to the police to complain.

The case of the abducted Pakistani Christian girl Maira Shahbaz aged 14

September 2nd, 2020 PAKISTAN: Maira receives death threats

A 14-year-old Christian girl in Pakistan has received death threats from the man she accuses of rape and blackmail – and her lawyer has insisted on 24-hour police protection for her and her family.

Sumaira Shafique, lawyer for Maira Shahbaz, described as “credible” the threats received from Mohammad Nakash and his supporters in the Punjab town of Madina, the Catholic teenager’s hometown.

In an interview today (Wednesday, 2nd September) with Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Ms Shafique said she had successfully appealed to the Rawalpindi bench of the Lahore High Court for police protection to be put in place pending the resolution of the case.

Ms Shafique said she has filed a legal petition for the cancelation of Maira’s conversion to Islam and her marriage to Mr Nakash, decisions she alleges the girl took under duress, amid reports that he had threatened to release a video showing her naked performing a sexual act.

She said: “There is no doubt that Maira’s life is in danger as people in this Muslim country will not accept her return to Christianity.

“Maira and her family are in hiding. We need to do everything possible to make sure they are safe.”

In spite of a birth certificate showing Maira was 13 at the time of her alleged marriage to Mr Nakash, Lahore High Court ruled on 4th August that the union was valid, highlighting the importance of her stated decision to embrace Islam.

But two weeks later, Maira gave a statement to police saying she had escaped Mr Nakash’s house, claiming the man had sexually abused her, threatened her with blackmail and forced her to submit to Islam and be his wife.

The family went on the run, until Ms Shafique, who took over the case from lawyer Khalil Tahir Sandhu, helped find her sanctuary.

She said: “We need people in the West to hear the truth about what happens to people like Maira so that pressure can be brought to bear to ensure their safety.”

Pakistan human rights activist Sajid Christopher said: “The situation for alleged apostates from Islam in Pakistan could not be more serious, especially if you are a Christian, a girl under 18 years of age and from a poor family.”

As a charity in support of persecuted Christians, ACN is committed to raising awareness of instances of violence and oppression.

The charity also provides legal and paralegal aid for faithful in Pakistan under threat of imprisonment and execution for reasons related to religious hatred.