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# Afghan women gain education and rights but still face abuse, forced marriages

By Pamela Constable, September 25, 2013



A private women's shelter in Afghanistan is shown on July 26, 2013.... (Pam Constable/The Washington...)

In a hidden shelter on the edge of the Afghan capital, a dozen girls and women crouched on thin cushions one recent afternoon, their faces drawn with fatigue and fear. Some had been found wandering the streets; others had traveled long distances in flight from abusive families, forced marriages or unhappy lives.

Raya, 18, a pretty girl with green eyes, said that when her parents insisted she quit school and marry a man they had chosen, she ran away instead. "Now we are living in a democracy, so we should have the right to choose," she said.

Shafia, 40, a hospital worker in an embroidered dress, told of being confined by her in-laws for 20 years. Last month, she fled. "I am an educated woman, and they wouldn't even let me out to visit my parents," she said.

Twelve years after the overthrow of the Taliban, many Afghan women are caught in a confusing time warp. They are absorbing new ideas about freedom and rights through the Internet and attending school and college in record numbers. They are talking with men on cellphones and watching bedroom soap operas from India and Turkey.

Yet they still live in a deeply traditional society where male elders decide their fates and in-laws rule their lives. Many are virtually sold as teenage brides, and if they run away, they are branded as "bad women."

As a result of this growing gulf between promise and reality, Afghan experts and advocates say the number of women and girls fleeing intolerable domestic conditions has skyrocketed, keeping the handful of urban shelters constantly full.

In addition, according to Afghan human rights groups, the number of girls and women charged with moral crimes (usually some variation of zina, or sex outside marriage) has increased 50 percent in the past several years.

Since 2001, Afghanistan has been governed as a Western-backed democracy, officially committed to women's rights and education. The Taliban's strictures on women working and studying are now confined to insurgent-plagued rural zones, and its tight controls on contact with the outside world are long gone.

But in a phenomenon that cuts across regional and class lines, women's rising expectations are crashing headlong into persistent pre-Taliban traditions, including child marriages, trading girls to settle disputes and ritual hounding by in-laws.

Even though several million Afghan girls are attending school, more than half are married before the age of 18 and about one-quarter are wed by their mid-teens, often because their families cannot afford to support them. In most cases, this means they must leave school forever.

Many who end up in shelters or prison are fleeing such situations. Although no longer strictly a crime, running away from home for a woman is viewed as tantamount to committing zina, a serious crime in this conservative Islamic country.

"We have come a long way in our struggle, but the mind of the society has not changed," said Mary Akrami, an Afghan activist who operates several private shelters, negotiates with families and helps represent victims in court. "Afghan women are learning they have rights and finding the courage to stand up, but what good does that do if families don't change?"

### **'We are fighting'**

The past several years have brought both legal advances for women and a political backlash against them, Akrami and others said. Many police officers have received training in how to treat female runaways and victims, but the number of female police officers remains low. About 350 men have been prosecuted under a 2009 decree criminalizing violence against women, but the measure has recently been challenged as un-Islamic by conservative leaders, and a legislative change in the criminal code now prohibits family members from testifying on behalf of abused women.

In early September, Human Rights Watch sent an appeal to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, warning that these moves could seriously compromise Afghanistan's development. The letter asked him to step up enforcement of the 2009 decree, support making 18 the minimum age for marriage, promote women's shelters (which are often criticized as brothels) and increase the number of female police officers.

The government has not responded officially, but analysts said Karzai, due to leave office next summer, is unlikely to alienate conservatives by speaking out on the issue.

With NATO forces preparing to withdraw and the country facing an uncertain political future, many women's advocacy groups fear that the gains they have made in the past decade are starting to erode as conservatives reassert themselves and Taliban insurgents wield more sway.

In a recent interview, the president's adviser on religious affairs, a conservative Muslim cleric named Enayatullah Balegh, accused the West of trying to force change on Afghan culture.

"Women in our country have all the rights and respect they are due in Islam. I feel sorry for Western women who are treated like prostitutes and shown naked on television," Balegh said. "We settle our problems through our religion and our families. Nothing the international community does will change that."

But change is already coming fast to this once-insular society, leading to frequent and sometimes violent clashes within families over arranged marriages, love affairs, incest and poisoned relations with in-laws. Many girls are beginning to refuse arranged marriages and insist on staying in school. High-profile abuse cases have been shown on Afghan television, encouraging other victims to flee or come forward.

Yet even prominent women who speak out for women's rights are not immune to retribution. Noorzia Atmar, a former member of parliament, fled an abusive husband and tried to seek a divorce. After her story appeared on Afghan TV, the husband burst into her office and threatened to kill her.

"I am a woman and I know my rights in Islam, but look where I am," Atmar, a forceful woman of 40, said in an interview at the Kabul shelter where she is in hiding. "We are fighting, but all the power in this society belongs to men."

### **'I just want to be free'**

Many of those who try to escape marriages end up in prison. The female wing of the Juvenile Rehabilitation Center in Kabul, a padlocked dormitory inside a prison complex, currently houses 25 girls and young women who are awaiting trial or serving sentences for crimes linked to moral misbehavior. Those suspected of zina are required to undergo medical exams to determine whether they have had intercourse.

On a recent afternoon, between embroidery class and preparing dinner, about 10 of the inmates told their stories. As with those living in shelters, they were allowed to be interviewed on the condition that their full names and faces not be revealed.

Many gave convoluted and semi-coherent accounts of family abuse, forced marriages, love affairs, rebellious behavior or vengeful violence. But there were several tragic common threads.

All of the detainees had endured harsh treatment and crushing dilemmas they were far too young to handle. And most of them had taken daring or desperate paths to escape —

running away with young men, trusting unscrupulous strangers, stealing money from home.

Narany, 17, wept into her blue head scarf as she told of being married at 15 and bearing a son, then being forcibly divorced and married off for a second time to an older man she did not like. She ran away with her former husband, got caught and is now serving four years in prison for adultery.

Ruma, also 17, said that when she was in seventh grade she was taken out of school and ordered to marry a man who already had a wife and three children and who used her as a servant. A policeman took pity on her and they ran away together. Now, she is serving a jail term for adultery and theft. "I don't want to go home and I don't want to be married. I just want to be free," she said, sobbing.

On a bunk bed in one corner, a girl was playing with something. It was a tiny bird she had tied to a string, and it fluttered frantically as it tried to escape. She had also fled an unwanted marriage, becoming involved with a boy and getting arrested.

"My family wants to come for me, and they will have a big meeting about me," she said in a flat voice, looking down at the bird. She had once summoned the nerve to escape an unhappy fate, but now she was resigned.

"I don't care what happens to me anymore," she said. "I have shamed them and I have to accept what they decide, even if they decide to kill me."