

Marriage—or Else

In Afghanistan, girls as young as 8 are forced into marriage. If they try to escape they risk public floggings, or worse

BY ROD NORDLAND & ALISSA J. RUBIN IN KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

The two Afghan girls had every reason to think the law would be on their side when a policeman at a checkpoint stopped the bus they were riding in.

Disguised in boys' clothes, Khadija Rasoul, 13, and Basgol Sakhri, 14, had been traveling for two days along rutted roads and over mountain passes to escape their illegal, forced marriages to much older men. Now they had made it to a more liberal province in the northwest part of the country, 175 miles from their remote village in central Afghanistan.

But the policeman recognized them as girls, ignored their pleas, and sent them back home, where they were publicly and viciously flogged for daring to run away from their husbands.

In another case, Sumbol, 17, was kidnapped and taken to Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan, then given a choice: marry her tormentor or become a suicide bomber.

"He said, 'If you don't marry me, I will put a bomb on your body and send you to the police station,'" Sumbol says.

Criminal by most Western standards, child marriage is common in many parts of Afghanistan, with the government either unable or unwilling to challenge it. Though the new Afghan constitution, adopted in 2004, technically forbids marriage before age

After they were forcibly returned to their villages, Khadija and Basgol were publicly flogged.



16, tribal customs dating back thousands of years often predominate in this landlocked country of 34 million people.

According to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in Washington, D.C., tribal leaders sometimes condone marriage for girls as young as 8. Marriage usually spells the end of the child's education or career prospects. And girls who refuse or run away can face severe penalties, like public beatings, mutilation, or worse.

"Early marriage and forced marriage

are the two most common forms of violent behavior against women and girls" in Afghanistan, says Fawzia Kofi, a prominent female member of the Afghan Parliament.

The most recent Unicef study found that 43 percent of Afghan women marry before age 18. Poverty is usually a motivating factor, either because a husband pays a large

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dowry—sometimes known as a “bride-price”—to the family, or because marrying off a daughter means one less mouth to feed. In some cases, fathers give their daughters away to settle debts.

That was the case for 15-year-old Sakhina. She was sold into marriage to pay off her father’s debts at age 12 or 13. (Records of birth dates are less common in Afghanistan and other developing nations.)

Her husband’s family used her as a servant. “Every time they could, they found an excuse to beat me,” she says. “My brother-in-law, my sister-in-law, my husband, all of them beat me.”

She managed to flee to Kabul, Afghanistan’s capital, to a secret shelter run by an organization called Women for Afghan Women. The group operates five shelters and says it took in 158 escaped child brides in 2010.

The Role of the Taliban

Law enforcement has either been part of the problem or ineffective in tackling it. As was the case with Khadija and Basgol—the girls who were publicly flogged—the police often return runaway child brides to their families rather than send them to shelters, says Manizha Naderi, head of Women for Afghan Women.

“Most police don’t understand what’s in the law, or they’re just against it,” she says.

Even girls who aren’t forced to marry face restrictions in areas of Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban. The reactionary Islamist group took control of the country in 1996 and imposed its radical version of Islam on the entire nation. Women were forced to quit their jobs and wear a head-to-

toe covering called a *burqa* in public, and girls weren’t allowed to go to school.

Though the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 after the September 11 attacks ousted the Taliban from power, the group has re-emerged in many parts of the country, and the U.S. and its allies are facing difficult choices with the war, now in its 10th year (see sidebar).

Child marriage is not limited to Afghanistan. According to Unicef, about one third of women ages 20 to 24 in the developing world were married before age 18 (see chart, p. 15).

Girls from poor households are twice as likely to be married off as children, and

the practice often has tragic consequences. Child brides are at a higher risk for experiencing domestic violence and contracting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Girls under 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s. And of course child brides suffer psychologically after being taken from their families, friends, and school, and forced to live, serve, and submit to their much older husbands.

Combating child marriage has been difficult in Afghanistan not only because it’s a part of the culture, but also because poverty leaves many families thinking they have few other options.

“It becomes a choice that many times no one wants to make,” says Paula Kantor at ICRW. In her research, many fathers told her “they’re marrying their daughters for bride-price because that’s the only income from which they can survive as a family.”

Aisha’s Story

Efforts to help runaway child brides have also been stymied by tribal traditions.

In Afghanistan, “the community is central to household survival,” says Kantor. “Therefore, if tribal norms are, ‘That girl ran away, she needs to be punished,’ a family might feel pressured to respond, even if they don’t necessarily themselves want to do that, if that’s the way to maintain connections to the community.”

The most infamous example is Aisha. Married at 12 to a Taliban fighter, Aisha escaped, but her father returned her to her



Disfigured by her Taliban husband, Aisha was fitted with a prosthetic nose (right) at a burn center in Los Angeles last August. She is now in the U.S. to undergo reconstructive surgery but plans on returning to Afghanistan.

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Child Marriage

Percentage of girls and boys married before age 18 in selected countries

	Girls	Boys
Niger	75%	6%
Bangladesh	66	5
Nepal	51	16
India	47	10
Uganda	46	7
Afghanistan	43*	-
Zambia	42	5
Bolivia	26	11
Cambodia	23	23
Ukraine	10	2
U.S.**	0.3	0.2

SOURCES: UNICEF 2010 SURVEY OF 20- TO 24-YEAR-OLDS; U.S. CENSUS *AFGHANISTAN FIGURE 2000-07 (STAT FOR AFGHAN BOYS UNAVAILABLE); **U.S. FIGURE FOR AGES 15-17

village, where her husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law—with the approval of the local Muslim clergyman, known as a *mullah*—sliced off her nose and both her ears.

“I regret what I did now, sending her back,” Aisha’s father says. “I only wanted to try to have good relations with their family despite their bad behavior, so I sent her back to them.”

Aisha’s story drew international attention when her mutilated face appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine last August. Though it’s rare for police in Afghanistan to intervene when villagers impose punishments for social crimes, the outcry surrounding the case apparently pushed them to act: Aisha’s father-in-law—just one of her tormentors—was arrested in November.

The Outlook

Manizha Naderi of Women for Afghan Women says that’s at least a step in the right direction: “This arrest gives hope to all Afghan women that their perpetrators will be brought to justice, that sooner or later criminals will be punished.”

But most cases go unpunished if they’re noted at all. And many Afghan women fear that a return to the Taliban or to civil war will only make things worse for them.

“People are very scared,” says Kantor at ICRW, who recently visited Afghanistan. “And, of course, the international community—we can all leave very easily, and we have no real understanding of the depths of uncertainty people face.” ●

UPDATE: THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

The U.S. wants to begin withdrawing troops this summer. Is Afghanistan ready?



President Obama visits U.S. troops in Afghanistan in December.

The war in Afghanistan began in 2001 in response to the September 11 attacks on the United States in which nearly 3,000 people were killed. The attacks were planned in Afghanistan by Al Qaeda, the Islamic terrorist group led by Osama bin Laden. Al Qaeda had been given safe haven by Afghanistan’s rulers, the Taliban.

The U.S. and its allies quickly ousted the Taliban from power. But as President Obama put it, the U.S. “took its eye off the ball” after the war in Iraq began in 2003. The Taliban made a comeback in many parts of Afghanistan, and defeating them has proved extremely difficult for the U.S. and its allies.

An increasingly tense relationship with President Hamid Karzai has been another challenge for Washington. His re-election in 2009 was marred by widespread accusations of fraud, and corruption has been rampant. Many Afghans have lost faith in Karzai, hindering American efforts to unite the country behind him.

Another obstacle is neighboring Pakistan, an unstable and nuclear-armed U.S. ally which has been unable or unwilling to root out Taliban and Al Qaeda forces who slip across the border. In recent months, the U.S. has stepped up attacks on the lawless border region, despite objections from the Pakistani government.

President Obama sent 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan last year, bringing the total to 100,000. At the same time, he said his goal was to begin withdrawing some U.S. forces by July of this year; the question is whether the Afghan army will be ready to maintain security if American forces do begin to leave.

Since the war in Afghanistan began, more than 1,400 Americans have been killed, and almost 10,000 injured. In a recent poll, 60 percent of Americans said the war is not worth fighting anymore. At the same time, there is concern that withdrawing prematurely would likely mean a return to Taliban rule and Afghanistan again becoming a safe haven for Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

In Obama’s recent review of the war, he said the U.S. made progress in 2010 and is on track to begin withdrawing troops by July. But he also said that the gains made “remain fragile and reversible.” ●