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Women's eNews

Afghan child bride traded to pay opium debt

By Fariba Nawa

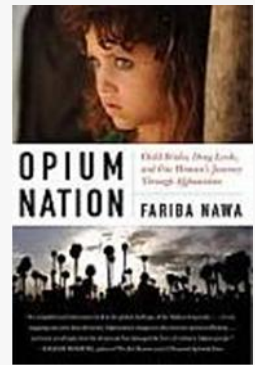
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Afghanistan's opium trade impacts the daily lives of Afghans like nothing else, says Fariba Nawa in her book "Opium Nation." In this excerpt she shares the story of Darya, a girl who was sold into marriage to settle an opium debt.

In the summer of 2003, I met a girl in an Afghan town straddling the desert who would become an obsession for me. I knew her for only a few weeks, but those few weeks shaped the next four years of my life in Afghanistan.

What I remember most about her is her scared look, a gaze that deepened her otherwise blank green eyes. She was the daughter of a narcotics dealer who had sold her into marriage to a drug lord to settle his opium debt. Her husband was 34 years her senior, and even her threats to burn herself to death did not change her fate. A year after I met her, she was forced to go to a southern province as the wife of this man, a man who did not speak her language and who had another wife and eight children.

I met Darya on a quest to write a magazine story about the impact of the Afghan drug trade on women. Ghoryan, the Afghan district where she used to live, is two hours from the Iranian border and the people there make their living on opium transport.



Opium Nation: Child Brides, Drug Lords, and One Woman's Journey Through Afghanistan by Fariba Nawa

In this vast district I met many men and women who were either victims or perpetrators in the worldwide multibillion-dollar drug trade, but none of them stayed in my heart as much as Darya. She had become a child bride and a servant, a casualty of the drug trade--an opium bride. Darya is a link in a long chain that begins on Afghanistan's farms and ends on the streets of London and Los Angeles.

Chasing Clues

In order to understand what happened to her, I had to understand the drug trade. I chased clues from province to province to find out who was behind the business; who its victims were; how it was impacting Afghans; and what the world and the Afghan government, were doing to stop it.

In the process of finding ways to deal with my demons, I wanted to tell the world that the Afghan drug trade provided funding for terrorists and for the Taliban, who were killing Americans and strengthening corrupt Afghan government officials whom the United States supported. A former chief of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration called the Afghan opium trade "a huge challenge" in the world. Americans and the British are directly harmed by it. Afghan heroin is a favorite among addicts because it's a potent form of heroin and increasingly available.

I spent 2000 through 2007 shuttling back and forth between Afghanistan and the United States, with detours to Iran and Pakistan. The majority of my time was spent traveling through Afghanistan. During that time, I witnessed the country's shift from a religious autocracy to a fragmented democracy and, finally, to a land at full-scale war.

The result of that war has been dependence on an illicit narcotics trade, without which the Afghanistan economy would collapse. For the opium trade is the underground Afghan economy, an all-encompassing market that directly affects the daily lives of Afghans in a way that nothing else does.

'Stories Few Have Heard'

Ghoryan district, Darya's childhood home, is full of individuals and families with stories few have heard. The Afghan women who live there are not the weak, voiceless victims they are so often made out to be in the Western media. Since they see themselves as part of their family units, Afghan women rarely demand individual rights, as women, something uncommon in the West. During my time in Ghoryan, these women, including Darya, showed me just how powerful they were and how capable of overcoming their problems.

The effect of the opium trade in Ghoryan is very real. Yet Ghoryan is not the only place where the drug trade resides. In some places, the trade is destroying lives; in others, saving them. During my time in Afghanistan, I was drawn to cities and villages where some chose this illegal business while local warlords forced others to dive into it.

Opium is everywhere--in the addict beggars on the streets, in the poppies planted in home gardens, in the opium widows hidden from drug lords in neighbors' homes, in the hushed

conversations of drug dealers in shops, in the unmarked graves in cemeteries and in the drug lords' garish opium mansions looming above brick shacks and mounds of dust.

The dust is a reminder of the destroyed land that opium money seems unable to transform into cement, asphalt or water.