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The Atlantic

Afghanistan's Opium Child Brides

02/09/2012

As the heroin trade suffers in Afghanistan, poppy farmers are marrying off their daughters, sometimes to unsavory and far-away men, to pay their debts.

She was a 12-year-old girl, with fiery green eyes and defiance on her face. Her father had promised her hand to a stranger from Helmand province who didn't speak her language, was more than 30 years her senior, and already had eight children. Her father had borrowed the man's money for his poppy venture. And now it was up to her to repay that debt.

Darya, as she was called in a new book by Fariba Nawa, *Opium Nation: Child Brides, Drug Lords, and One Woman's Journey Through Afghanistan*, represents a growing trend in Afghanistan, a trend in which families marry off their daughters to settle debts originating from the opium trade. "Opium brides," they called them.

Nawa, an Afghan-American journalist, spoke on January 10 at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on the impact Afghan's opium economy has on girls like Darya. Nawa met the girl when she traveled to Afghanistan in the early 2000s. She witnessed a town deluged with opium addicts and countless widows whose husbands and sons had died while smuggling drugs across borders. But nothing shook her like Darya. It was the child bride who opened up to her, talked to her as if she was a savior, while others around her hid behind their fear. Darya's narrative, as well as stories of those like her, make perhaps the most heartbreaking aspect of the opium trade.

"What's the saddest part? What's the most interesting part of this story to you?" she had asked her guide before she met the girl. "It's the opium brides," her guide had answered. And when Nawa asked him to introduce her to one, he responded, "Oh, which one? There are so many of them."

Child marriage exists throughout the world. Even if the number has decreased globally over the past 30 years, 64 million women ages 20 to 24 still marry or enter a union before they turn 18, according to a UNICEF estimate. In Afghanistan, that would be about 378,000 women. Although Kabul has passed a law to curb the practice, raising marriageable ages to 18 for males and 16 for females, more than 60 percent of marriages in Afghanistan involve girls below the legal age.

Marrying girls at a young age is nothing new to Afghanistan. For centuries, marriages have been used to settle debts and improve a family's financial condition. Many poor households see their daughters as an economic burden and would rather send them off quickly to their husbands. They have also treated women and girls as a means to settle monetary disputes, making them "loan brides" in exchange for debt relief. "But those marriages are within family," Nawa said. Cousins would marry. Two brothers would betroth their son and daughter to each other. But not many would promise their daughters to strangers from a completely different town, men with wives and families, who smuggle drugs and don't speak their language. "It has been done in the past," Nawa said. "But the level and how many are being done is unprecedented inside Afghanistan right now."

Nawa attributed that spike to the opium trade, Afghanistan's biggest industry. Despite the 65 percent increase in eradication in 2011, the country still managed to roll out a growth of seven percent in net poppy cultivation. As a result, opium production in Afghanistan has exceeded global demand for the past several years. A sharp production decline in 2010 barely hurt the world's supply; there was no major shortage of heroin -- a derivative of opium poppy -- reported from the consumer markets. The country is now the center of global heroin manufacture, with roughly 300 to 500 operating laboratories producing about 380 to 400 tons of heroin per year.

The Taliban regime relied on opium production for revenues. It legalized the farming, trafficking and processing of the illicit crop. Its agricultural program consisted of flying experienced poppy farmers all over Afghanistan to teach people the techniques of opium cultivation.

It didn't take much to convince Afghans to embrace poppy. Decades of war have destroyed their traditional orchards. Cyclical drought and poverty hinder Afghan farmers from growing high-profit fruit and saffron, which require an investment in irrigation systems. In the end, it was the poppy that met all the prerequisites: higher yield with less land, little irrigation, and greater profits. With the price high and rising -- 2011 gross income from opium per hectare has skyrocketed 118 percent from the year before -- it would take a lot more than free alternative crop seeds and fertilizer distribution to wean Afghan farmers off opium production.

Poppy seeds and fertilizer also cost money, but start-up farmers are willing to approach traffickers, asking to borrow money with a promise to repay with kilos of opium at harvest time. They know opium is much more promising than wheat. As eradication efforts ramp up, however, farmers who don't have enough to bribe officials end up watching their lucrative crop ripped up and flattened. Gone with it is their hope for a better future -- and, sometimes, their daughters.

"This is a business deal, essentially," Nawa said. "This has become a more common practice because of the opium trade, because this society has disintegrated and family is being interrupted."

Poppy farmers who give their daughters in marriage to lenders receive quittance -- and sometimes a cash dowry that can be used to start a new life. Even so, such opportunity offers little consolation to those who have chosen that path; loan brides are considered a shame to the culture. "The fathers who sell their daughters to settle their opium debts are ashamed of what they're doing," Nawa said. "It is not something that is accepted or normal."

There are no statistics on how many girls have been traded as a result of the opium trade. Data collection isn't the norm in Afghanistan--not even for birth records. And when these marriages are performed without being registered with the state or religious authorities, statistics are likely to be clouded by severe inconsistencies; the real number of girls entering marriage before 18 could be much higher.

Despite the shame and heartache the opium trade has brought Afghan families, poppy cultivation is proven increasingly resilient. For a country that's ranked almost at the bottom of the Human Development Index, growing opium poppy can be a real opportunity. Stories of those who have improved their lives through the illicit crop continue to be a source of inspiration. There are farmers who grow rich and reinvest the opium money to rebuild their communities. There are women who enjoy the ability to work; cultivating and processing opium are done within a compound, thus available to women under the Taliban regime. This gives women a chance to become an integral part of the society.

Still, many farmers want to stop growing poppy, but they won't until they can establish other sources of income.

And it's possible. Nawa has seen it: a woman who was able to quit opium cultivation once she had provided alternative sources of income for her family.

Poppy had given her the money to buy her son a car that he turned into a taxi. She also bought her daughter a carpet frame that turned into another source of revenue. "I think women who do grow poppy are very willing to stop growing poppy if they're able to invest in other businesses," Nawa said.

But such cases are rare. The source of strength in Afghanistan--the Afghan family--has been weakened by the drug trade, war and violence, according to Nawa. Families are broken. People are drowned in a never-ending cycle of poverty. Corruption has sucked away most aid money that could have pulled Afghanistan out of the heroin assembly line, she said.

The country, it seems, has become a network of spider webs that torture the innocent lives as much as the wrongdoers. And girls like Darya are a part of this web, though not intentionally. After many kind attempts to convince her to go with him -- each met with Darya's firm rejection -- the Helmand smuggler finally took her away, marrying the girl before she even reached

puberty.

"There are many sad stories," Nawa said. Despite much tragedy she has witnessed while documenting how the drug trade has impacted women, she sees a glimmer of hope. "One thing that you will know, or you will see among the characters is the resilience and their ability to just pick up and keep living. And I think that's where the hope is for women."