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Afghanistan's teen brides who set themselves alight

By Claire Truscott

03/07/2012

HERAT - Flayed by a fire she began herself, Aatifa's childlike frame is painstakingly wrapped in thick bandages -- her shrieks of "Allah" echoing around the hospital ward where surgeons prepare to graft skin back on to her skeletal torso.



Eighteen-year-old Zarkhuna (L), who set herself on fire, sits with her parents at her father's home in Herat. Depression, stress and domestic violence are driving many married women in Afghanistan to attempt suicide by burning themselves to death. (AFP Photo/Massoud Hossaini)

Her wide blue eyes alternating between flashes of anger and wells of tears, the 16-year-old Afghan girl struggles to explain what led her to douse her own body in petrol, step outside and light a match.

Married at the age of 14, the young carpet-weaver, who has nine brothers and sisters, said her mother-in-law criticised her housework and encouraged her mechanic husband to beat her for allowing her mother to visit too often.

She complained to authorities but was berated for causing trouble. Later told that her husband hated her and would marry a second woman, she swung between anger and depression before carrying out her masochistic deed.

Aatifa poured petrol over her head and, once outside her home, lit the flames that engulfed two thirds of her body. Her brother found her and smothered her with his clothes before neighbours took her to hospital.

"I just wanted to kill myself, this was my goal," she said, her bone-thin arm etched with flaring purple burn scars. "What can I do? I'm not useful anymore. I want to get a divorce, it's better to stop everything."

Bound by early marriage into a life of domestic disharmony, dozens of girls like Aatifa in Afghanistan's sophisticated but conservative main western city of Herat are choosing a brutal form of escape by setting themselves on fire.

In the past one year alone, doctors at a burns unit at the city hospital have seen 83 cases of self-immolation, with nearly two-thirds proving fatal.

The disturbing phenomenon is considered to be a cultural import from neighbouring Iran. But feuding between poor and uneducated families who marry off their daughters as young teens is usually at the heart of the problem.

"Sometimes it's for very small reason they burn themselves, and most of them complain about the in-law's family," said chief of plastic and reconstructive surgery at the burns unit, Ghafar Khan Bawa.

"There's an accumulation of depression, stress and domestic violation and then the woman just seeks a way of getting out of the situation. A way of expressing their anger, a way of expressing their depression."

Police, tribal elders, Mullahs and courts all exist to resolve family disputes which are common within Afghanistan's impoverished and illiterate societies. But it is considered culturally taboo for a woman to complain.

"There's a defect in the system because a woman cannot complain here. And if they were not accepted before burning themselves, then how will they be accepted with disfigurement and deformities and disabilities?" added Bawa.

Sitting propped up on a pillow at home across town, 18-year-old Zarkhuna's occasional smile is largely concealed by an enveloping neck brace, while her body scarred by 65 percent burns is clothed in a black burqa and red blanket.

She said the family of her husband, a rickshaw driver, had seemed nice before marriage, but when his mother and sister moved into their family compound fighting erupted.

Now banned from seeing their 10-month-old baby since she set herself on fire four months ago, she said she hopes not to divorce, but for her near-fatal action to provoke a peace settlement between the families.

"My husband wasn't cruel to me. But my mother and sister-in-law were complaining all the time about my job -- they became jealous," she said.

"The mother and sister wanted me to be under their control not under my husband's. If he behaves nicely with me I will continue with him."

Her father has said she must not take the case to the authorities, but leave their fate to God's will.

"I leave those people to God. I just want them to pray for my daughter because they're also poor people and I didn't do anything against them because they're also poor," said her father, Khor Mohammad, moving prayer beads and wearing a thick white turban. "I don't think the government can help us."

Herati women's rights advocate Suraya Pakzad said that early marriage and family feuds commonly caused dangerous levels of stress for women in the home, with many too young to cope with the wifely roles expected of them.

"Maybe not all of them decide to die, it's just a warning for their family to stop, and they never thought fire would immediately go to all of their body," said the head of the Voice of Women's Organisation in Herat.

The organisation operates two shelters for women, although all cases must be referred through the government. Once they realise there could be other options for escape she said the self-harming teens all wish things could be different.

"Whenever we meet them and talk to them they say they really regret what they did."