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Virginity or death for Afghan brides

RFE/RL (06.12.2015) - <http://goo.gl/hgdRCX> - Long-standing tradition holds that being a virgin is required for brides in Afghanistan, and they are expected to prove it.

One Afghan woman, speaking with RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan on condition of anonymity, says it is still customary in some areas of the country for in-laws to check for blood stains the morning after a wedding as proof of the bride's virginity.

Even being accused of having sex outside marriage can have dire consequences. Disgraced families have been known to demand that their "damaged" daughter-in-law be exchanged for her sister. Nonvirgins can be imprisoned in Afghanistan for adultery. And there are horrific tales of abuse, or worse.

"In some cases, a bride's ears and nose are cut off," says the Afghan woman. "They are forced into dirty clothes and taken back to her parent's home. Their heads are shaved. The bride's family is told that she is not a virgin. Other times, a bride is simply killed and her body is returned to her parents."

It's a discussion that is usually taboo in Afghanistan, but a recent spate of chilling public punishments of Afghan women accused of having premarital sex has brought the issue into the open.

In late November, a 26-year-old Afghan woman died of her injuries after being publicly lashed in the central province of Ghor. She had been accused of running away from home.

In October, 19-year-old Rokhsana was stoned to death by Taliban militants in the same province after having been accused of having premarital sex.

And in August, also in Ghor Province, a young man and woman found guilty of having sex outside marriage were lashed publicly.

Family Affair

The woman's own family is often behind the punishment, in some cases shunning the woman or handing her over to authorities for prosecution. But in the worst cases, her own kin can carry out honor killings.

"The existing culture among some families is that a ruined girl is given back to her family," Mariam Zurmati, a commissioner at the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, told RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan recently.

"In order to escape dishonor, that family will offer another of their daughters for marriage," she adds. "In some regions, women are simply killed. In some cases, even after years of marriage, a husband will abuse his wife."

Marzia, who only goes by one name, says her sister has endured years of abuse at the hands of her husband due to lingering suspicions that she was not a virgin when they married.

"I have a sister who didn't bleed when she got married," says Marzia, who is from Parwan Province. "Her husband beats her and she has bruises everywhere. Even after years of living together, he still abuses her and tells her she has been tarnished."

Even before the wedding, Afghan brides-to-be can be forcefully subjected to "virginity tests," in which doctors at government clinics test whether a woman's hymen is intact.

International human rights groups claim such tests contravene international law and are inconclusive in determining a women's sexual history.

Terena Yadgaari, a doctor in Kabul, agrees that virginity tests have no "medical validity," but notes that dozens of the examinations are carried out in government clinics in the capital every year.

So-called moral offenses, including adultery or even running away from home, are not considered crimes according to the Afghan Criminal Code. But hundreds of women and girls have nevertheless been imprisoned after being convicted of "immorality" by courts dominated by religious conservatives.

The Afghan Constitution prescribes that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam," but such rulings are at odds with more secular-minded passages in the constitution.

But in some rural areas, where Taliban militants exert considerable influence, residents often view government bodies as corrupt or unreliable and turn to Taliban courts to settle disputes.

The Taliban courts employ strict interpretations of Shari'a law, which prescribes death, or in other cases publicly flogging, for men or women found guilty of having a relationship outside marriage.

Public stoning condemned

RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan (04.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1MRHqoY> - Afghan lawmakers have condemned and ordered an investigation into the stoning death of a young woman accused of adultery.

Lawmakers discussed the killing, which took place in the remote Ghor Province in late October, during a November 4 parliamentary session.

"As a representative of the Afghan people, I urge [the government] to hand over to the clutches of the law those behind this incident and the wild criminals who ruthlessly killed or stoned a woman to death," Shukria Paikan, a legislator from the northern province of Kunduz, said during the session.

The brutal death of 19-year-old Rukhshana was captured in a two-minute video obtained from an eyewitness by RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan. The video, an edited version of

which was published this week, shows men identified as Taliban militants hurling stones at Rukhshana as she kneels in a hole in the ground, reciting an Islamic creed.

On October 25. The Afghan government blamed Taliban militants for the killing. Police said the woman, identified by the name Rokhshana, had fled her family with her fiance in a bid to find a place to be married. A local official said the militants accused the woman of having premarital sex. The video was provided to RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan.

The killing reportedly took place in Ghalmin, a village on the outskirts of Firoz Koh, the capital of Ghor Province.

Ghor Governor Sima Joyenda told RFE/RL on November 2 that the stoning was carried out by "Taliban, local religious leaders, and armed warlords" after Rukhshana was found guilty of committing adultery. Joyenda said that her family had married her off against her will and that she was caught while eloping with a 23-year-old Mohammad Gul.

Gul was lashed for the same crime, according to local police.

Stoning 'Un-Islamic'

Najia Aimaq, a parliament member from the northern Baghlan Province, told fellow lawmakers that the stoning should have been prevented. "Those individuals who carry out such acts should be handed over to clutches of the law and should be punished," she said.

In a November 4 statement, the office of President Ashraf Ghani called the stoning "extra-judicial, un-Islamic, and criminal" and condemned the incident in the "strongest terms." The statement added that the president had assigned a delegation to "seriously investigate" the matter.

Rafiullah Bedar, a spokesman for Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission, told Shamsad TV on November 3 that the stoning was "un-Islamic."

The Taliban has been widely accused of carrying out the stoning, a punishment rarely seen in Afghanistan since Taliban rule ended. In 2010, Amnesty International reported what it called the "first confirmed stoning in the country since the fall of the Taliban in 2001." In that case, a **couple accused of adultery was** stoned to death in a public execution in Kunduz Province.

Did The Taliban Do It?

Local police official Mohammad Zaman Azimi has said the stoning was carried out by the Taliban, as did Masooma Anwari, the head of women's affairs in Ghor.

But some, including activist Wazhma Frogh, co-founder of the Research Institute for Women, Peace and Security, are skeptical. "We are told elders did this!" Frogh wrote in a November 3 tweet. "Not defending any atrocities of Ts [the Taliban] but if done by elders then we're covering up a crime."

Joyenda -- the female governor of Ghor who has been the target of death threats, protests calling for her ouster, and outside criticism after a young couple was lashed in her province recently -- stressed that the village where the stoning occurred was controlled by the Taliban.

The provincial government's power extends little beyond Firoz Koh. Dozens of illegal, armed groups run by former warlords and militia leaders are active in Ghor, a key transit route for arms and drugs, and the resulting clashes are seen to be the source of much of the violence in the province.

The war in Afghanistan is often used as cover for a wide range of crimes, including revenge killings, kidnapping for ransom, and extortion.

Harsh Justice

The Taliban is also not a homogenous group. Afghan officials have used the name to label hostile former warlords, religious leaders, and tribal elders.

Capital punishment was widely practiced by the Taliban regime, which ruled much of the country from 1996-2001. Convicted adulterers were routinely shot or stoned in executions conducted in front of large crowds.

In rural areas, where Taliban militants exert considerable influence, some Afghans still turn to Taliban courts to settle disputes because they consider government bodies to be corrupt or unreliable. The Taliban courts employ strict interpretations of Shari'a law, which prescribes punishments such as stoning and executions.

The Afghan Constitution considers Islam to be the "religion of the state" and says that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam."

The stoning of convicted adulterers is banned under Afghan law. However, in many areas controlled by the Taliban, it is not uncommon for men or women found guilty of having a relationship outside marriage to be sentenced to death, or publicly flogged.

Taliban militants stone woman to death in Afghanistan

RFE/RL (03.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1SkXyOp> - Afghan officials say the Taliban has stoned to death a 19-year-old woman in the city of Firoz-Koh in Ghor Province.

Local police official Mohammad Zaman Azimi told RFE/RL on October 26 that the woman, identified only as Rokhshana, was killed the previous day. Her fiancé, a 23-year-old man named Mohammad Gul, was reportedly lashed.

The couple allegedly had fled their families in a bid to find a place to be married.

Masooma Anwari, head of women's affairs in Ghor Province, expressed grave concern over the situation of women in the province.

She said the incompetence of the local government has paved the way for such incidents.

Woman & man flogged in public – 100 lashes - for alleged adultery

Provincial police confirmed execution of the sentence adding measures were in place to safeguard the event

RAWA News (01.09.2015) - <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2015/09/01/man-woman-face-lashes-in-western-afghanistan-for-adultery.html> -

An Afghan man and a woman received 100 lashes each after they were found guilty of committing adultery in western Ghor province.

The punishment was given in public on Monday and after they were found guilty in a primary court.

Judges said that the punishment was based on Sharia laws and that the man and woman confessed that they had sexual relations.

The man and woman were hit by a leather whip but did not appear to yell.

Provincial police confirmed execution of the sentence adding measures were in place to safeguard the event.

See video at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-amnesty-condemns-lashes-for-adultery/27223175.html>
