

No longer behind closed doors: violence against women.

Leila serves me steaming tea and reassures the baby on her lap. Her everyday actions jar with her life circumstances: she is in protective custody, a survivor of one of the most extreme domestic abuse cases being overseen by Afghanistan's post-Taliban Government.

Five years ago, Leila was kidnapped, smuggled to a remote village and forced to marry. Helpless, her children were held at gunpoint to ensure her compliance, while her former husband was miles away. Her new husband, a powerful military leader, was renowned for his cruelty, often taking home victim's fingers and toes as trophies of his victories. Leila, along with her husband's other wives, endured beatings and forced sex until two incidents catalyzed her decision to flee. She witnessed his battering with an AK-47 and raping his own daughter. He later shot and killed the mother of the assaulted girl for refusing to serve him tea. "He just shot her--just like that, like she was nothing," Leila recounts, her eyes glazing into a shell shock. "They buried her the same day. Then that night he made us serve him dinner right there, right where her body had been."

There are no reliable statistics, but from testimonies of survivors of domestic violence, there are indications that violence against women in Afghanistan operates in a dimension of its own. The impunity of armed groups, the culture of permissiveness and inadequate judicial system in Afghanistan contribute towards markedly severe and prolonged cases of spousal battery and sexual assault.

According to Tonita Murray, Senior Police and Gender Advisor at the Ministry of Interior, only around 180, or 0.3 per cent, of Afghanistan's 53,000 strong police force are women, giving police stations limited options for offering women appropriate support services in the highly conservative country. Nor do legal authorities generally intervene in domestic disputes, as spousal battery is considered a personal matter to be dealt with through family networks. To exacerbate matters, 80 per cent of the rural population often inhabit areas too remote or insecure to allow law enforcement officials to investigate violent crime.

Leila's escape from her husband had succeeded through desperation and luck. She waited until she was sure he had left for a week-long journey, and then fled into the hills with two children in her arms, walking for 24 hours through snow to reach a nearby settlement. From there, she was delivered to her family in Mazar-e-Sharif. "My sisters didn't recognize me. They cried and cried and said, 'your eyes are Leila's, but nothing else'." Then one by one they requested Leila to stay elsewhere for fear of her husband's followers attacking their homes.

Leila found she had no place to turn. Her former husband wanted nothing to do with her. Her brother sought revenge and demanded that she throw her youngest child, sired by her abusive husband, in front of a moving car. "My sisters also told me to give up my baby, but what could I do, sell my child for money?" So Leila turned to the Government for help. She was identified as a high priority case and placed under protection.

One of the main problems facing Leila and other women fleeing abusive homes is lack of alternatives. In Afghanistan's clan-based society, women's virtue is viewed with extreme sensitivity as it reflects on family honour. Domestic violence and violence against women in general are often justified on the grounds of virtue. Men as the guardians of family honour ensure the good name of the clan through early marriage and restricted mobility of women in their household. Females who abandon household protection cause irreparable damage to their personal and family reputations. They essentially have no place outside the

household and are likely to face even greater violence if they return, as their actions are seen as bringing disgrace to their family.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Fouzieh, 19, whose skull has had multiple fractures from an abusive husband, got a divorce through losing custody of her son. Since divorce is very rare and stigmatized in Afghanistan, Fouzieh's parents beat her when she returned home. She then fled to a women's shelter, where she received literacy training and legal support. After several rounds of mediation, her family appeared to have relented and decided to accept her back. She is afraid, however: "My father has said he's willing to take me back, but I'm afraid once I am out of here, he will beat and kill me for the shame I have caused. What do I do?"

Media campaigns in Afghanistan have successfully raised awareness of women's rights. However, according to the director of the shelter, this has placed a double burden on women in abusive situations. "Women are now aware that they have rights and that their rights are being violated, but they have no adequate legal alternatives or protection to turn to." Through the concerted efforts of civil society organizations, government ministries and United Nations agencies, violence against women has been escalated to a national priority in Afghanistan.

On 6 June 2005, a presidential decree to establish the Inter-Ministerial Task Force to Eliminate Violence Against Women was granted. Led by the Ministry of Women's Affairs, with technical support from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Task Force comprises high-level officials from government and judicial bodies. It recently released a three-month work plan to combat violence against women at the national level. A family violence police unit, the first in the country and endorsed by the Ministry of Interior, was also created and trained, with the support of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and American and Canadian advisors.

More recently, the Ministry of Women's Affairs has developed a policy and comprehensive design for women's shelters, with UNIFEM assistance, and has organized and launched a nationwide advocacy campaign on gender-based violence, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme. At the civil society level, UNIFEM has helped coordinate non-governmental organizations' efforts to combat violence against women and has supported a research conference on the impact of traditional practices on women. It has also promoted Afghan journalists' dissemination of the legal and Islamic edicts prohibiting violence against women. UNAMA human rights officers have monitored and intervened in gender-based violence cases in all regions of Afghanistan, working with Afghan human rights organizations to find solutions and refuge for women facing violence.

Following her ten-day mission to Afghanistan in 2005, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Yakin Erturk, reported that important changes have occurred in the lives of women in the country since the fall of the Taliban. She called for continued vigilance and effort, stating that "violence against women remains dramatic in Afghanistan in its intensity and pervasiveness, in public and private spheres of life".

Such violence has certainly marked the lives of Leila and her children. As her eight-year-old daughter plays building a house, she makes rooms out of wooden blocks. "This room is for you, and this room is for me and Esmat. This room is for Jawad, Sahar and Qasim, and this room is for my mother." I ask who Jawad, Sahar and Qasim are. Leila answers, her eyes dark and weary: "My three older children. I haven't seen them since a year after I was kidnapped. They are back there somewhere." We fall silent. Meanwhile, Leila's daughter continues building her house, the wooden blocks and pencil stubs before her representing safety, refuge and a dream for the future.

(The names of victims and their children have been changed to protect their identity.)

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