

A Thin Line of Defense Against 'Honor Killings'



Women's shelters are one of the most provocative legacies of the Western presence in Afghanistan.

By ALISSA J. RUBIN MARCH 2, 2015

KABUL, Afghanistan — Faheema stood trembling in the courtyard of the large house, steeling herself for the meeting with her family.

She took a deep breath and ran inside, her black abaya swirling around her, and fell to the floor at her uncle's feet, hugging his knees, her face pressed against him, her shoulders heaving.

The reproaches came immediately. "How could you do this?" her uncle said. "You were always so sweet to everyone. How could you have done this?"

What Faheema, 21, had done was to run away from her home in eastern Afghanistan with the man she loved. She left behind her large family and the man that her family had promised her to. Although her uncle's words at first seemed kind, his tone had a dangerous edge: Faheema had to come home.

For a young woman from an Afghan village to go home after running away with a man is tantamount to crossing a busy street blindfolded: There is a strong likelihood that she will be killed for bringing shame on her family.

Faheema, who like many Afghans uses a single name, was one of the lucky ones: She had made it to an emergency women's shelter, one of about 20 that over the last 10 years have protected several thousand women across Afghanistan from abuse or death at the hands of their relatives.

These shelters, almost entirely funded by Western donors, are one of the most successful — and provocative — legacies of the Western presence in Afghanistan, demonstrating that women need protection from their families and can make their own choices. And allowing women to decide for themselves raises the prospect that men might not control the order of things, as they have for centuries. This is a revolutionary idea in Afghanistan — every bit as alien as Western democracy and far more transgressive.

As the shelters have grown, so has the opposition of powerful conservative men who see them as Western assaults on Afghan culture. "Here, if someone tries to leave the family, she is breaking the order of the family and it's against the Islamic laws and it's considered a disgrace," said Habibullah Hasham, the imam of the Nabi mosque in western Kabul and a member of a group of influential senior clerics. "What she has done is rebelling."

The opposition comes not only from conservative imams, but also from within the Afghan government itself. Lawmakers came very close in 2011 to barring the shelters altogether and in 2013 nearly gutted a law barring violence against women. They yielded only after last-minute pressure from the European Union and the United States.

Now, as the Western presence in Afghanistan dwindles, this clash between Western and Afghan ideas of the place of women means many of the gains women made after the 2001 invasion are at risk.

Although the Taliban's harsh restrictions on women alienated many Afghans and helped rally foreign support for the war, the idea that women must submit to men remains widely held.

"A lot has changed since 2001, but most people still have conservative, traditional views of women," said Manizha Naderi, who runs Women for Afghan Women, which operates shelters or other programs in 13 provinces.

That makes the fragile network of safe houses and the women who staff them even more vulnerable to restrictive legislation and attacks by local strongmen. The shelters, like so much of the Western project to coax change in Afghanistan, are emblems of a society in transition.

While the shelters have brought freedom to many women, others are stranded, safe for a time from their families but unable to leave because neither their families nor society accepts them.

Ms. Naderi estimates that about 15 percent of the women in her shelters cannot leave — ever. For these abused women, the longer they live suspended between two worlds, the less the shelter comes to feel like a haven and the more like a jail.

A Frightening Example

Above all, Faheema wanted to avoid the fate of Amina, an 18-year-old who ran away from her family in rural Baghlan Province in the summer of 2013 and whose case became widely known. She fled when her family told her she would be marrying an older man.

Amina made it to the provincial capital and was picked up by the Afghan Intelligence Service. Unlike many runaways, who are seen as fallen women and are prey to being molested by the police, she was not abused. Instead, she was brought to the women's ministry office, which exists in every provincial capital in Afghanistan.

The women's ministry sent her to the only shelter in the province. But after one or two nights, her family arrived. They promised not to harm Amina if she returned home with them, repeating that pledge on a videotape after meeting with the head of the provincial women's ministry office, Khadija Yaqeen. The girl then climbed into a taxi with her family.

Amina never made it home. Nine men accosted the vehicle on a deserted stretch of road not far from her home, pulled her out and shot her, according to her family. No one else was harmed, they later told the ministry.

Women's advocates and the police doubted the story. Why would armed men take just one young girl out of a car and shoot her? Why wouldn't the family call for revenge?

The answer pointed to something far more sinister than a random holdup. In much of Afghanistan, a runaway is a tainted woman, who cannot be married off.

"This is the perception: Once she leaves the family, she's in the hands of others, and they can do whatever they want with her — sexually abuse her — because she has left the family circle," said Mr. Hasham, the imam in Kabul. By tribal custom, which is particularly strong in rural areas, a so-called honor killing is the only way to eradicate the shame.

The Baghlan provincial police chief, Amer Khail, believes Amina's brother was involved in her killing, but said there were conflicting reports.

The women's ministry office did not press for arrests. Amina's short life and death drifted into sketchier and sketchier memory, with everyone involved claiming they had done the right thing.

Ms. Yaqeen of the women's ministry said she had to let Amina go because she asked to leave with her family.

"Nobody had beaten her," she said, "so I had no excuse to keep her."

Ms. Yaqeen admits she was called by a member of the provincial council. She said the council member did no more than urge her to talk to the family, who had come to the provincial capital to get their daughter back. Provincial council members tend to be deferential to the desires of powerful local families, who would be eager to cleanse the family honor.

But Ms. Yaqeen said Amina made the choice herself.

It seems likely that a young girl, frightened and among strangers and faced by her angry family, would try to appease them because she could hardly believe that her family would be willing to kill her.

Women's advocates in Baghlan have little question that this was an honor killing. "She should have been kept in the shelter for much longer," said Homaira Mohammedi, the acting head of the Baghlan shelter at the time, who says that she was away the weekend that Amina came in.

“We did everything according to the rules and regulations,” Ms. Yaqeen insisted.

“This is a problem of the society.”

A Family Confrontation

Faheema was sure that her family would not spare her if she left the shelter and went home.

“I had a problem with my father,” she said. “He engaged me to my uncle’s son, and I wasn’t happy to marry him, so I married another man.”

Her father told her he had bought a gun. “Wherever I see you both, I will kill you,” he said before she ran away.

The desperation of her family to have her come home suggested that her view was correct. They were willing to agree to almost anything to pry her away from the safety of the shelter. A younger girl, or a weaker one, might have given in. But one of the most striking characteristics of many of the women who make it to a shelter is that, like Faheema, they have a sad but cleareyed understanding that they are in danger from their own families. This is often the first step toward being able to save themselves.

Unlike the Baghlan women’s ministry, where Amina had just one meeting with her family before she was given back to them, Women for Afghan Women requires repeated sessions between the young woman, her family and a mediator before she can go home. . The average number of meetings is about eight, said Nuria Kohistan, who mediated Faheema’s case. If the staff is not satisfied that the young woman will be safe, they will keep her as long as necessary.

Faheema’s third session with her family was a few days after the first and involved her mother, a younger sister, a younger brother and the brother of her spurned fiancé, who had been at the previous meeting.

The 45-minute session was filled with tears and screaming and bordered on physical violence — several times Faheema’s mother grabbed her daughter’s arm and held it in an iron grip as if to drag her from the mediation room, through the door and out the gate. A tall, thin woman with a frightening strength, she seemed to hold Faheema in her sway far more than the men in the family.

As if to protect herself, Faheema entered the room with a veil covering her whole face.

First her mother said to the mediator: “My daughter wants to go with us. Her father is now in the hospital.”

She turned to Faheema and said, "We will get you divorced from that guy," referring to the man Faheema ran away with. Her fiancé's brother and her mother said they would support her marrying someone else.

Ms. Kohistan, the mediator, said in an aside, "They're saying these things, but as soon as they get custody of her, they will kill her."

Heaping on the guilt and reminding Faheema of her shame, her mother said, "We have two houses in Ghazni, but we will sell them, because we can't live in Ghazni anymore."

The mediator pleaded: "Please talk about this in a way that this problem could be solved."

Faheema put her head in her hands. Her 3-year-old brother knelt on the floor with his head under his mother's long skirt as if he were trying to block out the sound of the warring grown-ups.

As it became clear that the shelter was not going to turn Faheema over to her family, her mother tried offering the mediator a bribe. "Please help us, and we will give you a gift," she said, her voice pleading, tears in her eyes. Then she turned, almost spitting, to Faheema.

"You know your father, you know the character of your father," she said. Gripping Faheema, she dragged her up from the chair. "He will kill me. You can come to my grave tomorrow."

Finally, Faheema summoned her courage. "Why don't you understand?" she said. "I already got married."

And then she appeared to resign herself to the future. "This thing I did, I did. I cannot go with you, even if I lose everyone in my family," she said and added, half speaking to them and half to the mediator, "I cannot go back home, because they will kill me."

She pried her arm away from her mother's grip and ran into the main building's basement rooms. There, her mother could not reach her — she was kept out, and Faheema locked in, by a heavy metal gate. Her shoulders heaving, Faheema sank to her knees and wept hopelessly.

Never Going Home

The women in the long-term shelter try to cheat sleep by huddling together in the dark, their voices a way to ward off nightmares. The torments they endured at the hands of their families are written on their bodies. Knife scars traverse their faces

and necks. Beatings with chains mark their backs. Some limp from broken bones that were never properly set. Several have faces eroded by acid, a favorite weapon here.

Daily life is an endless effort to escape the haunted precincts of memory; images of pummeling hands, the thumping sound of wood hitting their legs, of their bodies falling to the floor, the taste of blood in their mouths.

There are 26 women in the long-term shelter run by Women for Afghan Women in Kabul. If Faheema's family continued its threats, this shelter would become her home.

That these women are still standing, and that some are trying to piece together complete lives, is a cause for wonder and a testament to their strength. In the safety of the halfway house, the women offer a glimpse into the worlds they have fled: muddy courtyards strung with laundry; screaming children and squawking chickens; cramped rooms for women and often not enough food. Women in Afghanistan are the last to eat, the last to bed and the first to rise.

Gul Meena, 16, survived a brutal attack by her brother after she fled an older husband, who had beaten her, and ran away with another man. She had been just 8 or 9 in her home in Kunar Province on the Pakistan border when a man in the next village offered money to her unemployed father for her.

In her innocence, she was thrilled to be given a white dress and makeup for the wedding ceremony. "I was thinking, this is the future, my husband would be buying me new clothes every day," she said. In the car on the bumpy ride to her new home she remembers addressing her new husband as "uncle."

"Uncle, please take care of me. I'm afraid I will fall," she said as she bounced on his knee in the car.

From the moment she arrived in his house, she was a servant. The only grace was that he was not allowed to have sex with her before she had her first period. Two years after they wed, the moment came and he forced himself on her. "I was like a thing and they sold me," she said. "He was beating me with everything near to him. With his glasses, with his mobile phone, with wood, with stones, and with his hands."

Lonely and bewildered, she tried at least twice to return to her father's house, but the family sent her back to her husband and finally she went to a neighbor's home. The husband of the family ran away with her to Nangarhar Province in

eastern Afghanistan.

When her brother caught up with them, he slit the man's throat and slashed Gul Meena 15 times with an ax, nearly blinding her and leaving her for dead. When she woke up in the hospital, she looked in the mirror. "I was very damaged," she said. "Before, I was beautiful and young."

Although she does not see herself that way, she is still a stunning young woman. She has never gone to school but speaks with a simple eloquence. Now she fears that she is ugly and no one will marry her. "Men are always interested in the beauty of a woman," she said. "They are never interested in the heart."

In the long-term shelter, most women feel a deep relief. No one is beaten. There is enough food. Chores are shared and, above all, there are choices: Some girls decide to go to school and try to make up for the years they were kept as virtual slaves. Others go to classes at beauty school in the hope of learning a skill that they will be able to use. One has a job as a house cleaner, and another is a skilled tailor and makes clothes while caring for her 6-year-old daughter.

"We try to find a solution," Ms. Naderi said, but she admitted there were few options in Afghanistan. It is exceedingly rare for a woman to live alone here, and so the staff tries to help women recreate families when their own have shunned them. "Sometimes we can find husbands," she said. "We've married maybe 10 or 11, but it's difficult."

While traditional attitudes remain deeply ingrained, women's advocates do see changes. "Now women are finding a voice," said Soraya Sobrang, a member of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. "And also they want to have some rights and have some decision-making. If you want to marry my daughter, you have to ask me as well. The men think the women want to deprive them of rights. This touches their pride. And this creates violence in the family."

The battle between tradition and a fragile new sense of women's rights continues. A government committee investigated the shelters after a television program accused them of forcing battered women into prostitution. The committee found that most of the shelters were well run.

The committee members recognized that most of the women were at risk of beatings or death if the shelters were closed or their capacities diminished, but no one wanted to defend the shelters publicly. The outcome relieved the women who ran the shelters and Western aid organizations: The government would not close the

safe houses but, at the same time, there was little public support for spending money from the Afghan budget on them.

However, Ms. Sobrang said: "The international community has promised to continue support." Such funding is essential if the shelters are to survive. Ms. Naderi relies on generous funding from the United States government, which accounts for close to 90 percent of her budget. The balance is raised from private, mostly foreign donors.

The women inside the halfway house understand the risks they would face if they had to leave. "I cannot go anywhere alone," said Mariam, 22 who escaped an abusive Taliban husband and fled to the shelter. "Everybody likes to have their freedom, but I cannot have mine."

Inescapable Fear

In the end, Faheema was able to leave the shelter, with the help of a lawyer provided by Women for Afghan Women. After four or five months, a court recognized her marriage to her husband, Ajmal, and the attorney general ordered her to live with him in Kabul.

But it is not exactly a happy ending.

Although they are in love, they live in terror of being cornered by a member of Faheema's family and being beaten or killed. They live in poverty because Ajmal had to shutter his shop in their hometown, Ghazni, and cannot go there for fear of being killed. He has no money to start a new business.

A thin young man who wears Western clothes and, in keeping with more modern Afghan ways, does not have a beard, Ajmal comes across as serious and anxious.

"We live in fear and in hiding," he said. Three times a day, when he goes out to buy a long loaf of Afghan bread, he finds himself looking around nervously to see if any of Faheema's family is lying in wait for him.

He worries all the time about his widowed mother and two sisters, who still live in Ghazni. When he had his small cosmetics shop there, he contributed to supporting the family. But now, only his widowed mother's meager income as a tailor helps feed the family.

None of this has weakened the couple's resolve to be together, but it weighs on them because in Afghanistan, to not be able to go home is to be an outcast, almost an orphan.

Faheema tried to make peace between their two families and braved a phone call with her angry father to beg him to meet with elders from Ajmal's clan. But her father refused to see them and said the only thing that would satisfy him is if they gave him a daughter to marry off to his son or nephew in exchange for Ajmal's taking Faheema.

Despite the hardship, Faheema hopes her sisters and cousins will have the courage to demand that their families ask permission before making plans to marry them off. She wishes that her father had respected her enough to ask her. "My message to my father is that he should ask his children first before making any decision for their lives," she said, wistfully.

In the cold Kabul winter, as they prepared to return to their small, damp apartment, which is all they can afford, Faheema said she had one more wish.

"Take us out of Afghanistan," she said, "because we won't be able to have a quiet life here."

Rod Nordland and Jawad Sukhanyar contributed reporting.

Women's War: This is the second article in a series examining the legacy of efforts to help Afghan women and girls.

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