

Afghan Gypsies Wait for Recognition

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Official promises to ensure community has access to basic services have yet to be realized.

Mah Gul, 70, works from morning to night on the streets each day as a palmist and fortuneteller.

Clad in a worn, torn dress with a string of colourful beads around her neck, she grabs the attention of passersby by shouting, "Let me see your fortune!"

Mah Gul is from the Jogi, an ethnic group known in various countries by different names. In Europe and North America, their counterparts are often called gypsies.

The Jogi have been present in Afghanistan for some 120 years, migrating from Azerbaijan, Bukhara, and other areas. But life is hard for them.

"We don't have food, homes, our children are not accepted at schools, we are insulted and cursed by the public, and people harass us," she told IWPR. "From morning to evening we tolerate abuse from the public just to find some food."

One of the biggest problems Jogi face is that they do not have national identity cards, known as tazkira in Dari. This means that they have no access to a wide range of basic services, including medical care, education and the ability to vote.

"We don't have national identity cards so we can't buy property," Jogi tribal elder Shamsuddin explained. "Whenever we try to build homes for ourselves, landowners damage the buildings. All this means we have to live in old tents in summer and winter alike."

The 70-year-old continued, "Our children are not accepted at schools just because we are gypsies and we don't have tazkira. When women of our families beg for food, people are so charitable that they give them rotten, inedible food."

Shamsuddin said that almost 800 gypsy families lived in Balkh province, with about 10,000 gypsy families throughout Afghanistan.

Their lack of tazkira also means that although Jogi have also suffered from the results of decades of war in Afghanistan, they cannot draw on the same resources as Afghan citizens.

Abdul Saboor Qadiri, director of Balkh's department of repatriation and refugee affairs, said that his office provided homes and land to refugees and people displaced due to war or natural disasters.

"Our department also provides foodstuffs and clothes to these people," he said. "But due to the fact that gypsies don't have national identity cards, the department of repatriation and refugees has never been able to help them."

The exclusion also applied to help from international bodies, he continued.

"Some years ago, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees decided to help gypsies with food and other goods, but due to the fact that gypsies didn't have national identity cards they were deprived of UNHRC aid."

Article Four of the Afghan constitution of Afghanistan lists more than 14 ethnicities that make up the country, but the word Jogi or gypsy is not included.

Qazi Syed Same, the head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in the north, said the right to a nationality was fundamental.

"The first clause of Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: Everyone has the right to a nationality," he said, adding, "Unfortunately the gypsies have been deprived of this and this is the biggest violation of their human rights."

He explained that since gypsies had no history of permanent settlement, they also lacked property or communal facilities such as mosques or graveyards. Their children were also deprived of education.

This set them even further apart from other communities, especially since Jogi women's traditional means of support is begging or fortune-telling.

Lailoma, a young Jogi woman, spends her days panhandling on the streets.

“Begging is the way we make our living but we do get sad when people insult us,” she said, adding that it was also hurtful when others suspected that the Jogi were not real Muslims. “We don’t have graveyards and we don’t have mosques so that people could see us [worshipping] and know that we are Muslims just like them. So others doubt our Islam.”

Marriage practices amongst the Jogi were also very different, as Lialoma explained.

“Gypsies don’t let their daughters marry anyone apart from another gypsy,” she continued. “Also, girls can only get married if they are 18.”

This is in sharp contrast to elsewhere in Afghanistan, where early marriage is common.

“The bride and groom don’t stand together during their marriage,” Lialoma continued. “Photos, filming and a hotel reception are also not part of our culture. Just after the marriage, the bride is taken to her in-laws home and after a traditional meal, people start leaving and the marriage ceremony over.”

“A dowry, make-up, music and dancing are not part of weddings in our culture,” agreed Mah Gul. We just put a stick on a bag and then the marriage agreement is signed. Then people eat together and after that the marriage ceremony is over.”

Also, unlike in other Afghan communities, amongst the Jogis it is the women who go out to work and the men who stay at home.

“Women are considered to be the king and the leader in our culture,” Shamsuddin explained. “We follow and obey the orders of our kings. The men are actually women and women are men amongst gypsies because the women earn money by begging or fortunetelling, but our men are usually busy with chores at home and keeping animals like dogs, quails and so on.”

Assadullah has been married for seven years and has two children. “Sometimes I go to the bazaar for entertainment, but I usually stay at home. Keeping and playing with quail is my hobby. It’s part of our culture that women should be the money earners and men should be the homemakers.”

DENIED BASIC RIGHTS

Local officials agree that gypsies have long been marginalised and discriminated against, but said that there was little they could do.

Balkh provincial council head Mohammad Afzal Hadid said, “I am so ashamed because our council and the government have so far done nothing for gypsies.”

Munir Farhad, spokesman for the governor of Balkh, also acknowledged that local government did little to protect the rights of gypsies.

The reason was, he said, because gypsies did not settle down in specific areas but rather wandered from one place to another.

“Gypsies have been forgotten and ignored during the 100 years of their history here and this problem should be solved.”

But although officials may express such sentiments, civil rights groups say that it is the government that has repeatedly failed to address their concerns over the issue of the Jogi.

“The rights of the gypsies are violated because the government has consistently failed to pay attention to them or take responsibility for them,” said activist Najib Paikan. “Civil society organisations have long shared reports of gypsies’ problems with the government, but the government has not paid much attention to protect their rights.”

There are some localised initiatives to register the Jogi. IWPR has seen a 2014 memo from Kabul’s Central Statistics Department authorising Balkh officials to distribute national identity card to gypsies.

Addressed to the Population Registration Department of Balkh, document number 1272 read, “In the event that a gypsy tribe settles down permanently in the areas of Balkh province and the representatives of the gypsy tribe in the Balkh Provincial Council and related government departments agree on the distribution of national identity cards to the gypsy tribe; so after the legal registration process of each individual of the gypsy tribe, Balkh’s Population Registration Department should distribute national identity cards to them.”

Muhibullah Quraishi, director of Balkh’s population registration department, said that they had since issued 1,000 national identity cards to Jogi.

However, according to the registration book seen by IWPR, the official figures were 112 tazkira issued to

Jogi in 2015 and 94 in 2016.

Hamayoon Mohtat, the newly appointed national Population Registration Director, told IWPR that he had asked the president to issue a decree that would see tazkira distributed to all Jogi nationwide.

He said that he hoped this would be put in place “after some legal procedures”.

The Jogi community itself has lost faith in such assurances, as previous attempts to roll out identity cards to gypsies on a mass scale have had little effect.

“Many promises have been made in the past on this issue, but they were never fulfilled,” Shamsuddin said. “When we approach government departments to get national identity cards, they tell us that ‘you don’t have a specific place to live so we can’t give you identity cards.’”

Naqibullah, a Jogi leader in Kunduz, was displaced from his home province to Kabul due to fighting. He too said that his attempts to register so as to obtain documents were met with ill-treatment and abuse.

“Even in Kabul no one respects us,” he said. “Whenever we approach the national identity card department to receive cards for ourselves, officials there insult us and use foul language towards us.”

Shamsuddin said that the Jogi would not give up their right to be part of the Afghan nation.

“We also belong to this land. People insult our women and children on the streets, in the bazaars and markets,” he continued, adding, “We have been disrespected, insulted, mocked, and harassed during the 120 years of our history. We are gypsies but aren’t we human? Don’t we have the right to live here?”

This report was produced under IWPR’s Promoting Human Rights and Good Governance in Afghanistan initiative, funded by the European Union Delegation to Afghanistan.

Location: Afghanistan

Topic: Human rights

Focus: Promoting Human Rights and Good Governance in Afghanistan

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/afghan-gypsies-wait-recognition>