

Afghanistan's Unwilling Addicts

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Rise in opium use among women blamed on addict husbands who prefer docile partners.

Arezo's opium habit began nearly a year ago, and she blames her husband for forcing her into it.

"I refused, but he finally threatened to kill me," she said. "I would cry while smoking opium with him, but I finally got used to it."

Arezo said her husband – a cousin whom she married in an arranged marriage – developed his addiction when he spent eight years in Iran.

When IWPR asked her why her husband would want her to use drugs, she replied, "My husband said that women won't live with addict husbands – they either run away or fight with them, so it's better if the wife becomes an addict as well to avoid problems."

Arezo's plight is shared by many wives in Afghanistan's western province of Herat, where the local counter-narcotics office says women account for around 15 per cent of the 60,000 recorded addicts in the region, and the numbers are rising.

Zemarai Hasin, head of the addiction treatment department at the provincial health department, said eight out of ten women addicts had been forced into it by their husbands.

Many of them end up seeking treatment at Shahamat, an addiction treatment centre in Herat. Among them is Parigol, who tried to get her husband Faiz Ahmad to stop when she discovered him using opium regularly after they got married.

"I used to fight with him and stop him doing it, but he threatened to beat me up," she added. "When we started to fight more, he did beat me up and he forced me to smoke opium with him. After I was forced into smoking a few times, I became used to it and carried on for a year. But then opium stopped having an effect, so my husband got heroin and we both smoked that."

Parigol's heroin use left her looking like a 50-year-old although she is just 24. Her two-year-old daughter was with her in the clinic, and she was incapable of lifting her up to stop her crying. She had to sit up with difficulty to take the child in her arms.

Now she says that if she recovers, she will go back to her parent's house.

Meanwhile, her husband is being treated in the male section of the clinic. Lying in bed with a drip in his arm, Faiz Ahmad, 30, could not open his eyes and found it hard to speak.

He admitted forcing Parigol to take up drugs, saying, "She wouldn't have stayed with me if I hadn't addicted her. She would have run away with someone, and I would have been both dishonoured and lonely."

Other contributory factors in female drug use, health officials say, include poverty, domestic violence, and the proximity of Iran. Although opium comes from Afghanistan, many say addiction is particularly prevalent among those who have spent time as refugees in Iran.

Hasin said drug-taking among women presented particular health concerns.

"Many children of addicted women also become addicts through inhaling the smoke, and are treated in the clinic. And in many cases where pregnant women have used drugs, the baby is born with an addiction," he said.

He said the Shahamat clinic takes 155 women as in-patients every year, and 350 others receive treatment from mobile health teams travelling round the province. Those in the clinic stay there for 45 days and when they leave, they remain under observation from the mobile teams to ensure they do not start using again.

Health officials say the number of addicts of both sexes is overwhelming their currently limited capacity. But the provincial counter-narcotics chief, Gholam Jilani Daqiq, says a 180-bed specialised drug treatment hospital will open next year and will go some way towards tackling the problem.

The provincial department for women's affairs says it recognises there is a growing problem, although the head of its welfare and health section, Zahra Beriya, says it lacks the funding and mandate to conduct

proper research into the numbers involved.

Nevertheless, she said, the department was working with teachers, community elders and Muslim clerics to disseminate information about the harm done by drugs. More practically, a new scheme will see her office working with police to identify cases of forced addiction.

“Under this programme, if a husband forces his wife to use drugs, he will be arrested by the police at the request of the women affairs’ department. That programme will be implemented shortly,” she said.

Forcing one’s wife to commit illegal or immoral acts prohibited under article 32 of Afghanistan’s domestic violence law, and carries a prison term of up to three months.

A spokesman for Herat police headquarters, Nur Khan Nekzad, said a number of women had filed complaints of this kind.

“The police summoned their husbands and prepared case files for submission to the prosecutor’s office,” he said.

Aminullah Motasem, head of Islamic education at Herat University, said illicit drugs were forbidden as harmful by religious law, and people were not allowed to harm either themselves or others.

“If women are forced by their husbands into performing illegal or prohibited activities, they should not obey them and they should use their right to obtain a divorce,” Motasem said.

Dr Sayed Khalil Moayed, a psychologist and social affairs analyst, predicts that high addiction rates among mothers will have devastating effects on the whole of society.

“Formation of the personality begins in the family... children have greater contact with their mother from the start and are with her most of the time. It’s obvious that a good, healthy and conscientious mother will create good, healthy and conscientious children for society,” he said. “But if the mother or another woman in the family is suffering this kind of disaster, it is obvious that the whole of society will face disaster.”

Moayed warned, “In my view, this is a greater danger than anything that Afghans have faced to date.”

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