

Breaking a Vicious Cycle

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Unaware of their rights and with nowhere to turn to, many victims of violence suffer in silence. When Ogulnabad's husband gets drunk and angry, his wife of five years is usually the first to bear the brunt of his rage. "He often hits me ... even when there is no reason for him to be angry. He does it, as he says himself, as a 'preventative measure'," said Ogulnabad.

When she complained to her mother-in-law, Ogulnabad was told to suffer the beatings in silence and tell no one outside her immediate family. (1)

Ogulnabad is from Turkmenistan, but her story is familiar to women throughout the region, despite the very different social and cultural contexts in their countries. From Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan to Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus, the level and types of violence suffered by women at home, work and school are depressingly similar.

Too often, like Ogulnabad, the women have nowhere to turn and are even blamed for what has happened to them. Many are unaware of their rights, not surprising perhaps as the subject of violence against women is largely taboo - so the vicious cycle continues. (2)

This lack of opportunity for debate on key issues affecting women in the region helped inspire the creation of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting's Women's Reporting and Dialogue Programme.

The project sought to strengthen the capacity of female journalists to cover gender issues including domestic violence. IWPR created a network of reporters whose articles gave voice to these women in trouble, telling their stories and drawing attention to their plight.

As one participant at an IWPR-organised regional conference in Baku said, "The social problems faced by women, particularly violence against women, can only be revealed by female journalists."

Another added, "Women ... who are victims of violent crime are often blamed for what has happened to them. In cases like these, female journalists have an important role to play in revealing the whole picture and not just accepting society's condemnation of the women."

Throughout the project, IWPR journalists have examined the various forms of gender-related violence - from abuse at home to sexual harassment at work along with rape and largely region-specific problems like bride kidnapping.

They've also looked at the root causes of this violence, examining why it happens and what, if anything, can be done.

What was clear from the beginning of the project was that the financial hardship faced by women, who out of necessity are both homemakers and breadwinners, has forced them into dangerous situations.

Last spring, IWPR met two young Kazak women who'd been lured to Turkey with the promise of jobs as saleswomen.(3)

Lyuda, 16, and Sveta, 19, had hoped to earn money to buy the new clothes and luxuries they couldn't afford at home but instead were sold as sex slaves and forced to work up to 18 hours a day as prostitutes.

Their passports were taken and all the money they made given to their madam who, after a traumatic trial during which the girls endured a series of crude comments and questions, was eventually sentenced to four years on charges of recruiting women as sex slaves.

Kazaks who monitor the sex trade point out that exploitation also occurs much closer to home, with an analysis of calls made to a hotline set up by a women's NGO finding that one third came from women desperate to escape abuse and brutality in local saunas.

A 13-year-old girl from Taraz who was raped at a sauna is typical of the young and impoverished women who work in such places. "I argued with my parents and ran away, but had nowhere to go. A friend took me to a sauna where I was treated like an important guest for several days. But then they told me they would not let me go until I paid with my body for the food and rest," she said.

Shokhsanam Abdukhalilova from Andijan in Uzbekistan wasn't forced into prostitution but says the more than 20 US dollars she earns each day means returning to a subsistence wage is unthinkable. (4) But she fears for her safety, "I don't want to work for a monthly salary that is no use for anything. So I continue like this, with no idea ... in whose arms I may die."

Some who refuse to sell their bodies as a way to make money have turned to the shuttle trade - buying small quantities of goods abroad then bringing them home to resell in street markets or shops. But this already difficult and dangerous job is made more perilous by threats of violence and a new and worrying trend reported by many women interviewed by IWPR, the demand for sexual favours.(5)

A Kyrgyz trader on her way back from Russia, Kalymkan, told how her hands were twisted and her passport taken by border officials who asked for sex before it would be returned.

This according to organisations set up to protect the rights of migrant workers is all too common, but leaving their families and travelling the region as shuttle traders remains one of the few options available to women in the current climate of poverty and high unemployment.

Kyrgyz political scientist Elmira Nogoibaeva said, "The shuttle trade does not require any specific skills or proficiency. This is why, despite the very high risk, women are prepared to do it."

Like the border guards who abused Kalymkan, acts of violence committed by those in positions of authority are all too common.

Sexual harassment of female students by teachers is widespread in Turkmenistan, for example, though rarely reported because victims fear criticism or loss of their reputation. (6)

Leila, a quiet and serious young woman from eastern Turkmenistan, was attacked by her teacher who had invited her to stay behind and discuss her thesis after the other students had gone home. "I certainly didn't expect that instead of going through my thesis, he would throw me onto a table and start pressing himself against me," she said.

Leila opted to leave university rather than suffer further abuse but other cases of harassment have ended in tragedy. A former student at the Turkmen State University told IWPR that a classmate hanged herself after a respected teacher made sexual advances.

In Uzbekistan, where the authorities impose robust, often brutal, controls over most aspects of life, a seemingly benign family planning campaign has been beset by allegations of forced sterilisations on a wide scale. (7)

IWPR interviewed healthcare experts and mothers who accused the government of using coercive family planning methods that are often brutal in their implementation, and that allow for neither consultation nor alternative options. Doctors told the reporters of a secret order from the health ministry instructing them to either perform hysterectomies on young women who've already given birth or implant intrauterine devices.

Experts told IWPR that such acts of violence - whether committed by those in authority or at home by a family member - will increase as women try to assert themselves in society. (8)

"Our women try to be active in social and political processes and take a leading position in society," said Gulnara Hasanova, head of an Azeri NGO, Organisation for Women in Civil Society, which found in a recent survey that physical abuse is the main reason for divorce in Azerbaijan. "Men with a patriarchal mentality are scared of this sudden development and are worried that women may not only become their equals but even become superior to them."

Perhaps nowhere is this dangerous trend more evident than in Afghanistan, where in the struggle between the modern world and traditional ways, the latter is gaining strength along with conservatives who insist that women have no business seeking power. (9)

During the recent election, leading woman's rights campaigner Soraya Parlika received a telephone call from a man who said her life was in danger if she continued with her campaign for a parliamentary seat. Another female candidate had her house burned down, and up to 50 others voluntarily withdrew from the race citing security concerns.

Humaira, however, had no such political ambitions and was just 15 years old when she died at the hands of her fiancé Salim - another victim of the grim Afghan proverb that women belong either in the house or in the grave. (10) Her crime: a real or imagined flirtation with another man.

According to interior ministry statistic, 558 women have met violent ends in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban. Of those, 274 were murdered and a further 284 women committed suicide.

As in Azerbaijan, analysts trace the rising murder rate to the relative freedom women have enjoyed since

the fall of the Taleban regime four years ago. During the Taleban years, women were not allowed outside unless accompanied by a male relative and many Afghan men are reluctant to relinquish the control they had over their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters during that era.

The situation is made worse by a police force that is largely ineffective in combating violence against women, and when an abuser is caught he is seldom punished as a warning to others.

As in Afghanistan, the legal system in Kazakstan offers women little protection or refuge from danger and as a result they seldom involve the authorities, preferring to endure in silence. This despite official statistics that suggest that half of all women living in some rural areas are victims of repeated violence at the hands of their partners. (11)

Psychologist Sergei Chipashvili from Dagestan suggests this regional trend of quiet suffering is the result of poor parenting. He said girls are raised to submit unquestioningly to their elders, particularly men. (12) They are treated as a commodity – often married off to someone they don't love, or even know, all in the interest of their families.

Those who defy convention and speak out against an abuser face being shunned by their loved ones and by society in general.

That was clear during an IWPR investigation into the controversial topic of incest in Dagestan where, despite ample evidence that girls are falling victim to this shocking crime, the subject remains taboo and little is done to protect the victims. (13)

Nineteen-year-old Albina was just 14 when she was raped by her father. She told her mother and female relatives who believed her but were too afraid of being socially ostracised to call the police or even kick him out of the house.

Women who do find the courage to expose incidents of incest face a wall of denial.

“Relationships between fathers and daughters border on the aloof here, so this simply couldn't happen,” said Akhmednabi Akhmediev, a prominent Dagestani commentator, demonstrating a common assumption.

In the rare cases where incest against a small child comes to light, then public opinion will rally behind the victim. But if she is an adolescent then there is often suspicion that she provoked her father.

The “wall of silence” allows another abuse to go largely unpunished.

Kidnapping would-be spouses is a longstanding and controversial tradition throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus, seen by some as a harmless way of saving money on a wedding and by others as a barbaric violation of human rights.(14)

The kidnappings comes in various guises from forced abductions to a more harmless type of elopement when for financial reasons brides agree to be “kidnapped” – often with the consent of their parents.

What most have in common, however, is that once a girl is kidnapped she can't come home, shut out by a family afraid of being shamed in the eyes of friends and neighbours. For that reason, few women go to the police to report they've been kidnapped. (15)

Though the situation for women is relatively bleak, there is some reason for hope. In Azerbaijan, for example, the law was recently changed to increase sentences for bride kidnapers to ten years. (16)

In Kazakstan, meanwhile, a draft law attempting to set out clear and effective mechanisms for protecting victims of domestic violence is being debated by parliamentary deputies. (17)

Dagestani incest victims now have a help line to ring (18) and in Turkmenistan there are now 11 women's resource centres in the capital Ashgabat alone, a promising sign that attitudes are starting to change. (19) In Tajikistan, the country's first-ever shelter for victims of domestic violence has opened. (20) The centre can accommodate just six people so far but plans are afoot to increase capacity, and workers say those who've turned to the refuge for help have already benefited enormously.

There are signs of progress then, but there remains much to be done with female journalists playing an important role in educating and supporting women in the struggle ahead.

- (1) Suffering in Silence (WP No 2, 02-Jun-05)
- (2) Suffering in Silence (WP No. 2, 02-Jun-05)
- (3) Kazak Women Sold As Sex Slaves (WP No. 2, 02-Jun-05)
- (4) Police and Prostitutes in Unholy Alliance (WP No. 6, 29-Jun-05)
- (5) Shuttle Traders Risk All (WP No. 2, 02-Jun-05)
- (6) Turkmen Lecturers Prey On Students (WP No. 4, 30-Jun-05)
- (7) Birth Control By Decree in Uzbekistan (WP No. 1, 19-May-05)
- (8) The Cost of Equality in Azerbaijan (WP No. 3, 16-Jun-05)
- (9) Dangers of Running for Office in Afghanistan (WP No. 5, 14-Jul)
- (10) Living Dangerously in Afghanistan (WP No.6, 29-Jul-05)
- (11) Little Support for Kazak Wives (WP No. 3, 16-Jun-05)
- (12) From Village Life to Prostitution in Dagestan (WP No.9, 08-Sept)
- (13) Incest Victims Suffer in Silence (WP No.10, 22-Sept-05)
- (14) Azeri Bride Kidnappers Risk Heavy Sentences (WP No. 14, 17-Nov-05)
- (15) Kidnapped Brides Controversy (WP No. 8, 25-Aug-05)
- (16) Azeri Bride Kidnappers Risk Heavy Sentences (WP No. 14, 17-Nov-05)
- (17) Little Support for Kazak Wives (WP No. 3, 16-Jun-05)

(18) Incest Victims Suffer in Silence (WP No.10, 22-Sept-05)

(19) Suffering in Silence (WP No 2, 02-Jun-05)

(20) Tajiks Pioneer New Refuge Approach (WP No. 12, 20-Oct-05)

Location: Caucasus
Central Asia
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Topic: Focus on Key Themes of Women's Perspectives

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