

Female Suicide “Epidemic” in Tajikistan

Author: [News Briefing Central Asia](#)

Unchecked domestic violence seen as root cause.

One winter evening I went out into the yard, poured aviation fuel over my legs and set fire to myself,” said Mosharif, a young Tajik woman from Vakhsh in eastern Tajikistan.

She was taken to hospital and survived, but she regrets that she did.

“Why did they save me? I don’t want to live like this,” she said.

Suicide rates are high among Tajik women because of unchecked domestic abuse and because victims are unaware of their rights.

From January to September 2008, the latest period for which statistics are available, there were 240 recorded cases of female suicide in Tajikistan. Experts think the true figures are a lot higher as some deaths are misreported.

“Suicide among women has become an epidemic, like HIV/AIDS or malaria,” said Mahmaddullo Davlatov, a member of the Association of Psychologists of Tajikistan.

Human rights activists say around eight out of ten violent crimes occur within the family home. It is common for men to assault their wives, who enjoy little protection from relatives as they generally move to the husband’s family home after marriage. (For a report on the status of women, see **Gender Equality a Dead Letter in Tajikistan**, RCA No. 539, 31-Mar-08.)

“Although there are no official figures on [the number of] victims of domestic violence, it’s a very acute problem in Tajikistan and represents a great threat not just to women, but to the wellbeing of the whole of society,” said Zebo Sharifova, executive director of the League of Women Lawyers.”

Womens’ rights groups list many reasons why women take such extreme measures – domestic violence, sexual assault, a husband’s adultery, or the arrival of a second wife – polygamy is technically illegal but is common in Tajikistan. Other factors include lack of money, and the absence of a husband, leaving wives vulnerable to abuse from his relatives.

Alternatives such as leaving are frequently not an option. A stigma attaches to women who seek a divorce, and their own families may be reluctant to take them back.

Fundamentally, says Orzu Ghanieva, who heads Gulrukhsor, a women's centre in the northern city of Khujand, suicide is a consequence of women being treated as "chattels and servants".

After she got married at just 16, Mosharif says her husband and mother-in-law beat her regularly, even when she was pregnant.

"I thought everything would change when my daughter was born, but it got even worse," she recalled. "My husband hit both me and the baby. He said I should get out of the house because I hadn't been able to bear him a son and he didn't need a daughter. At the age of 17 I no longer wanted to live. I kept thinking about how to be free of this nightmare. I dreamed of jumping in the river or setting myself on fire."

As in Mosharif's case, one of the most common methods of suicide among women in Tajikistan - as in neighbouring Uzbekistan and Afghanistan - is self-immolation.

Some experts like Zafar Saidzod, formerly head of the Khovar news agency and now a presidential adviser, say self-immolation has deep roots that predate the advent of Islam and may be connected with older Zoroastrian beliefs.

"The preference for this specific method of society is principally connected with the cult of fire," he said. "Fire is believed to cleanse the soul and end moral suffering."

Not all suicide cases involve young women. Sayram was married for 14 years and had four children before she made a number of suicide attempts - poisoning herself, throwing herself in a river, trying to hang herself, and cutting veins.

She was driven to desperation by her husband, who beat her badly and never gave her money for basics like food and children's clothing.

"In the end I lost sight of the sense of living," he recalled.

Eventually she doused herself in kerosene and set fire to herself. When she woke up in hospital she had 50 per cent burns.

In other cases, women are driven to make a suicide attempt by members of their own families.

"I am the only girl in the family," said one young woman. From the age of 12 I had a job as a cleaner and I was saving up so I could study to be a lawyer. But my brother forbade me from studying. He used to kick me and tell me not to go out of the house so I could remain as the servant to all of them.

She too set herself on fire. “I didn’t want to die; I just wanted him to stop assaulting me.”

From a legal point of view, the problem, say many experts, is that Tajikistan lacks specific legislation concerning domestic violence. Cases can be brought under laws on common assault, but women are often afraid to go to the police because they do not believe they will get a fair hearing.

There is also the specific offence of “driving to suicide”, under which 30 prosecutions took place in January-October last year.

Young wives are often mistreated by their in-laws, who regard them as little more than a source of free physical labour for the household.

Lawyer Faizinisso Vohidova says the courts are increasingly prepared to handle domestic cases of this kind, and a number of women have been convicted of abusing their daughters-in-law.

In terms of legislation, the situation is not without hope, as a bill on domestic violence is currently being drafted.

Representatives of the public order department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, meanwhile, told IWPR that an internal order has been issued setting out penalties for police who fail to respond to complaints from allegations of domestic violence made by members of the public.

However, it is common for women not to take cases forward.

As academic Abdulvohid Shamolov explains, in Tajikistan one does not discuss one’s domestic troubles with friends and relatives, let alone with outsiders.

“People frequently condemn women whose husbands assault and humiliate them,” he said. “There’s a perception they allow themselves to be treated like that. And crimes committed within the family remain invisible, and therefore go unpunished.”

Dr Shoira Yusupova, a surgeon at Tajikistan’s national burns centre, says it is common for husbands to get their wives to sign a statement that their burns were accidental.

Both Sayram and Mosharif recalled how their husbands visited them in hospital for this purpose.

“He asked me to tell the prosecutor the burns resulted carelessness,” said Mosharif. “I refused to do so for a long time, but he and his mother were always pressuring me. In the end I told the police it was an accident. Then my husband ran off to Russia.”

IWPR spoke to one woman, Shamsia, whose husband was eventually convicted even though she did not report him herself.

Shamsia ended up in hospital after swallowing over 100 sharp items – broken razors, needles, nails and fragments of glass.

The marriage was an arranged one, and although she repeatedly returned to her parents’ home after her husband attacked her, they always sent her back.

Doctors incorrectly diagnosed a stomach ulcer, and Shamsia’s husband refused to pay for further investigation. He sent her back to her parents, where her father had her hospitalised again.

At that point she confided in a female relative, who informed the hospital authorities.

Shamsia’s life was saved by an operation, and her husband was arrested, tried and convicted of forcing her to swallow the sharp objects.

Experts say the government should be doing more to confront the problem of female suicide. It is the role of the state, said Ghanieva, to guarantee equal rights.

Among the measures human rights activists are pressing for are the domestic violence legislation currently in the drafting stage, a new commission which would work to prevent female suicide, and a network of social services to help women in difficulties.

Shamolov says that for a start, the authorities should set up a research centre to collate and study data on violence within the family so that the basic information is available.

Pessimists argue that since society is male-dominated, there is little sense of the urgency of change.

A senior government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IWPR there was an awareness of the link between suicide and domestic violence. The reason why little was being done about it was not indifference, but lack of available funds, he said.

“The government has almost no funds for addressing domestic violence,” he said. “And there are no statistics on it. We are under an obligation to gather data, but we don’t get any resources allocated for this. So no one talks about it.”

Dr Yusupova says the consequences of suicide attempts are far-reaching for the women involved and for those around them.

Treatment and recovery from appalling burn injuries are slow and painful for the victim.

“To see it is to experience physical and psychological pain,” she said Dr Yusupova. “You wouldn’t wish it on your worst enemy.”

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