

## **How Superstition Rules Afghan Women's Lives**

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Experts say that traditional beliefs can constitute another form of gender violence.

Nadia, a 26-year-old woman from Parwan province, says that she is being punished for a crime she never committed.

"Five years ago my father-in-law's cow gave birth to a calf, but the calf died. After that, my in-laws blamed me for bringing bad luck and began to beat me. They thought it was my presence that had caused the death of the calf.

"My in-laws told me, 'Your arrival in our house has been evil and unlucky for our family and if you stay, family members might die because of you.'"

Wiping her tears away with the corner of her burka, Nadia continued, "They made my life so hard that I felt I couldn't stand it anymore, but still tried to carry on. Then one day they simply threw me out of the house."

Nadia was forced to return to her parents' home after just nine months of marriage and has remained there for the last five years.

"Although my husband has not officially divorced me, he told me, 'you are divorced'. He has not given me any assistance over the last five years," she said.

Superstitious beliefs are common in Afghanistan's traditional and conservative society, particularly in more remote rural areas.

Portents of bad luck include a crow alighting on a person's house or sweeping a room at night.

Some traditions, however, can have serious consequences for women's lives. For instance, engaged or newly married women are looked on with particular suspicion as potential harbingers of good or bad luck.

Sometimes, the consequences of supposed ill fortune can last for decades.

Dil Jan, a 61-year-old from Wardak province, is still ostracised by relatives following an incident that happened when she was a newlywed.

"In the same year that I was married, disaster struck my father-in-law's apple orchard and all its harvest and products rotted away. From that year the family nicknamed me Bad Luck. And because of the devastation of the orchard I can't even begin to tell you how much I was disrespected and insulted. Even today, my relatives don't invite me to their engagements and weddings. They tell me, 'You are bad luck and you have the evil eye.'"

Dil Jan cannot read or write, but she has no hesitation in dismissing such superstitious beliefs.

"Whatever has been written in your destiny by Allah is what will happen. The belief that one person brings good luck and another brings bad luck are completely false," she concluded.

Experts say that such beliefs go hand in hand with ignorance and illiteracy and often lead to both physical and mental abuse.

"Superstitious beliefs are another form of violence against Afghan women which can ruin lives," said Zeba Haidari, head of women's rights in the regional office of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

"A lack of awareness of their rights among women as well as illiteracy means that they simply accept these superstitious beliefs."

Haidari said that the AIHRC had organised numerous educational workshops for women, on this issue, but the fear of attack remained a serious problem.

"We can't go to remote areas due to a lack of security. Also, men don't let women leave the house because of the security situation so many girls are deprived of an education," she continued.

Haidari said the government had to shoulder much of the blame for failing to come up with a coherent plan to improve women's lives. But she added that individuals also had to try and strive for gender equality.

“Women have to fight to save themselves from this situation, otherwise they will have to bear responsibility for their own condition.”

IWPR approached a number of officials from the ministry of women’s affairs on this issue but they declined to comment.

Farzana Safai, head of rights section of the ministry for women’s affairs, would only say that superstition was neither a legal nor a juridical issue.

“This problem has not been discussed in the ministry. We don’t know much about it,” she told IWPR.

Sociologists note that superstitious beliefs have deep roots in all human experience but are particularly prevalent in developing societies.

In the absence of education, people interpret events according to superstitious beliefs.

Baryalai Fitrat, a social science lecturer at Kabul University, said that such irrational beliefs were a way to explain life’s hardships and exert a sense of control.

“This concept is declining in the developed world, but ideas of good fortune, bad luck, signs and portents and the evil eye are strong beliefs in most undeveloped societies. People interpret events and accidents which have no logical and rational connection to each other according to superstitious beliefs, not on the basis of cause and effect”.

Fitrat agreed that Afghan women were particularly vulnerable to such practices.

“Men are in full control of women both politically and economically. Women’s level of education and general knowledge is poor and substandard. Also, women have little information about their rights so they have to accept the consequences of events that don’t have any connection to them, and accept them as their fate due to these superstitious beliefs.”

Religious experts stress that superstitious beliefs run contradictory to Islamic thought.

Daee-ul-haq, deputy minister of the ministry of pilgrimage and religious affairs, said, “Superstitious beliefs have no basis in religion and are completely false. In Islam we have the concept of taqdeer, or destiny, and this is determined by Allah when a person is in the fourth month of development in his or her mother’s womb. We have always ordered religious scholars and the mullahs of the mosques to preach sermons informing people about this issue.”

Observers say, however, that attitudes are changing, particularly amongst more educated people.

Nargis, now 30, related how she feared her engagement would be broken off after a fatal accident shortly before her wedding.

“When my fiancé’s family was travelling to Kunduz from Kabul for the marriage ceremony, they had a traffic accident on the highway,” she told IWPR. “A four-year old child subsequently died and many others were wounded.”

“When my relatives, who had gathered in our house for the marriage ceremony heard about this, they started staring at me. I heard some of them say, ‘the bride has the evil eye so what will lie ahead for her husband’s family?’”

“I was so scared that my husband’s family might break off my engagement with their son if they thought the same way. However, when they arrived, they ignored the superstitious comments - because they are educated people.”

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