

Love, Afghan Style

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Women are still being used as currency in the marriage market.

Zakira was given away in marriage to stop a blood feud. Her uncle had murdered a man and, rather than start a round of revenge killings between the families, 20-year-old Zakira was bestowed on the murdered man's brother – who happened to be three times her age.

The young woman's misery can be clearly seen in her face but, she said, at least she had the consolation of having restored peace to the two families. "It is my fate," she shrugged.

Now aged 22 and obviously quite ill, Zakira is refusing to go to a doctor. "I am praying to die, because anything is better than this living death," she wept.

"I do not know why God created women. We live no better than animals."

Forced marriages have long been a custom in Afghanistan. Daughters are used as currency – to settle debts, to facilitate advantageous, if expensive, marriages for male children, or, as in Zakira's case, to settle inter-family quarrels. But these marriages actually cause as many problems as they resolve, according to women's rights experts.

Judge Fawzia Amini, director of the women's rights department at the women's affairs ministry, said that, according to their research, half of all family feuds begin with a forced marriage. This problem is much more widespread in the provinces, she said, adding that while the ministry is working on this problem, its powers are limited and it is struggling against the heavy weight of tradition.

"We do not have any executive authority - the only way we can work is through propaganda," she said.

Dr Khadija Alokozai, psychiatrist at Ali Abad hospital, said that well over half of their mentally ill patients are female. Out of these, she said, the overwhelming majority are women who have been forced to marry against their will.

Qayamouddin Kashaf, a member of the Afghan Supreme Court, deems forced marriages a nationwide problem. "Islam has given women the right to choose their own husbands. Parents should not force their children into marriages for their own benefit," he said, adding that he believed people's lack of information about Islamic law was to blame.

President Hamid Karzai addressed this problem at a gathering held in Kabul on April 22, to celebrate Mohammed's birthday. The president called on religious scholars to preach to the population against forced marriage. "Underage and forced marriage is against Islam," he said.

The problem of forced marriage exists all over Afghanistan, but in the capital, at least, it seems to be on the wane.

Gulai Jan, 21, who was born in Kabul's Shar-e-Kohna district, has been promised to a man who already has two wives. Her parents are giving her to the man in settlement of a large debt, but Gulai Jan refuses to bow to her fate. The young woman has very little education, but life in the big city has given her courage, or at least bravado. "I will not accept this marriage even if they kill me," she said.

Once a woman is married, she becomes, in effect, the property of her husband's family, with very little control over her life. Hassina, 35, is a widow. She was 18 when she was married to an old man because her parents were in debt to him. Her husband passed away after a relatively short time, leaving her with two small children. Hassina's daughter is now 14, her son 13, and she wants to remarry. But her male relatives – her husband's brothers – are refusing permission.

"My in-laws are telling me that I have to either marry my husband's brothers or remain a widow," she said, with tears in her eyes. "I do not like my husband's brothers, so I prefer to remain a widow."

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Location: [Afghanistan](#)

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