

Marriage of Inconvenience

Author: [IWPR trainees](#)

The case of a woman whose “husband” is a six-year-old child highlights the problems of childhood betrothals in Afghanistan.

Gulghoti is a beautiful young woman of 25. Her dark eyes soften, then fill with tears as she looks at Hekmat, a quiet, skinny six-year-old who lives with her.

“I have brought him up since he was three,” she said, her voice breaking. “I even used to feed him.”

The boy is not her child, her brother, or even her stepson. He is her husband.

“My life is just one big problem,” she said. “Please tell other people not to do this.”

Six years ago, Gulghoti, who lives in southern Helmand province, married a young man to whom she had been betrothed since they were both children. Once the parents had agreed on the match and the terms, the deal was almost impossible to break, even after her fiancé was seriously injured in an accident.

Her father died when she was young, and her widowed mother did not have the means to resist pressure to honour the contract.

Gulghoti duly married her disabled fiance when she was 19, but he died after a year, leaving her a widow.

According to custom in this predominantly Pashtun region, once a woman marries, she remains more or less the property of her husband’s family. If she is widowed, she will commonly be married off to a relative of her deceased husband.

“I had to obey these rules, and marry my husband’s younger brother,” said Gulghoti.

This happened despite the fact that Hekmat was only three at the time.

“They forced me to marry this baby,” she said. “By the time he reaches adolescence, I will be an old woman.”

Hekmat does not understand that the woman who bathes him, looks after him, and prepares his meals is actually his wife. He calls her “khala” - “auntie”. He is small and shy, and shrinks away from strangers. He does not attend school - no one in his family is literate.

In Afghanistan, parents sometimes betroth their children almost as soon as they are born. There are cases of 10-day-old children being engaged or even married to each other, despite legal and religious

prohibitions against underage marriages.

In most deals, a significant amount of money changes hands. The groom's family provides a bride-price, along with gifts of clothing, jewellery, sometimes livestock. The transaction makes it difficult to renege on the contract later on.

The custom is dying out in certain parts of the country, but there are still many instances where people such as Gulghoti and Hekmat are caught in a situation they cannot control.

"I will never be happy," said Gulghoti. "I will never be a real wife."

The young woman lives in her husband's home, as is customary, and trembles with fear that he father-in-law might hear that she has spoken to a reporter.

"But please give my message to others," she begged. "Tell parents not to arrange marriages for their children when they are babies. It only leads to this kind of catastrophe."

(Ghulgoti is not the interviewee's real name.)

IWPR is implementing a journalism training and reporting project in Helmand. This story is a compilation of reports by the trainees.

Location: [Afghanistan](#)

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