Marriage Misery Driving Women to Despair

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Often with no one to turn to, battered wives see suicide as the only way to end their agony. Driven to despair by her husband’s constant beatings, Pakhshan Muhamad, 36, decided seven months ago that she could take no more.

She tried to commit suicide, pouring kerosene on her body and setting herself alight. Somehow she survived - but the scars are still visible on her face despite several plastic surgery operations.

“[My mother-in-law] made false accusations against me in front of my husband. He always believed her - and this created problems for me,” said Pakhshan, who has four children.

Cases of attempted suicide have spiraled in recent years - self-immolation being the most common method and the one with the highest number of fatalities.

In the first six months of 2006 alone, more than 830 women in the region have sought to end their lives this way, with around 350 of them dying from severe burns, according to figures compiled by the Sulaimaniyah Emergency Hospital, the only medical centre in this part of the country able to treat burn victims.

The numbers are a big increase on last year when 715 women attempted self-immolation - a fifth of them dying of their injuries. Much fewer but, nonetheless, an increasing number of local women try to kill themselves by taking drugs or poison: 80 in 204 rising to 210 the following year.

Zainab Osman, 34, is tired of life. She works from dawn to dusk, doing all the housework, caring for her three children and tending to sixty sheep on the family farm in Taza, 90 kilometres southeast of Sulaimaniyah.

Her husband offers no help at all, instead only compounding Zainab troubles. “He thinks I am an animal. He wants me only for sex and for taking care of the sheep. Whenever I disobey him, he starts hitting me,” she said.

She feels so desperate that she’s twice tried to poison herself with pesticides. “I wanted to scare my husband, so he would not hurt me again,” she said.

Sameera Hassan, a social researcher on women’s affairs at New Life, an NGO that tries to educate women and to promote women’s rights, said one of the main factors driving them to suicide is physical violence. “Many women are beaten and humiliated by their men,” she said.

Another common reason especially for young women is forced marriage. Sameera Muhammed, a social researcher from Sulaimaniyah, said, “They are prevented from doing what they want, especially in choosing their future spouse. Those girls are educated, but their relatives often still adhere to old social traditions.”
Many women seem to see no other way out because they are afraid to talk to anyone about their problems. In the more conservative rural areas where tribal traditions are still strong, it is considered a shame to share marital difficulties with people from outside the family. In these traditional families, divorce is not an option for the women.

Nigar Kamal, a university student, took a drug overdose after her father hit her for wearing short skirts. She recovered, but then later set herself on fire to protest against the restrictions imposed on her. Again she escaped death, and refused to change the way she dressed. Relatives accused her of having loose morals, and her father began beating her once more. “People cannot accept change here,” she said, “Especially if women want to change things, for example their clothes.”

Unable to turn to other members of their family for help, Nigar and her like also have little prospect of getting specialist counseling, as few psychologists or psychiatrists are prepared to deal with such cases. And most women are too embarrassed and shy to seek such assistance.

Domestic violence victim Nashmeel Abdullah, 43, is one of the few who’ve tried to get outside help, but her experience is discouraging. “Psychiatrists throw you in a dirty hospital. That is why no one dares to go,” she said, adding that women also fear being stigmatised. “If you go to psychiatrist, people say you went mad.”

The concept of shame and honour is so powerful in this part of the world that women who’ve attempted suicide often dare not speak of their ordeal. Family members accompanying them to hospital say they’ve had accidents, but doctors are able to distinguish whether a patient has burned herself deliberately or accidentally.

Traces of kerosene on the upper part of the body are a strong indication of self-immolation, said a doctor at Sulaimaniyah Emergency Hospital who declined to give his name. Sometimes, patients tell doctors and nurses the truth, he said, but they would not notify the police fearful members of their family might be arrested.

Pakhshan regrets what she did to herself and hopes that one day she will “look like I did before”.

“I call on all women not to even think about setting themselves alight because a deformed face and body is worse than death,” she said.

In attempt to deter women from resorting to self-immolation, several Kurdish NGOs run education campaigns about dealing with domestic violence. The Hataw (sunlight) organisation, for instance, prepares regular radio dramas on the subject. Aso Ibraheem, the head of Hataw, knows it is a problem that will not go away overnight. “Ours is a long-term project,” he said.

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