

## **Teenage Marriage Persists in Tajikistan**

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Despite law change, underage girls are still being married off in rural communities.

Tougher legislation to tackle underage marriage in Tajikistan has led to numerous prosecutions, but the practice still persists, with families arranging secret ceremonies or bribing officials.

A law passed in 2011 raised the legal age of marriage from 17 to 18. Anyone involved – parents, Muslim clerics or even the bridegroom – can be fined or spend several days in prison. Another law on parental responsibility passed the same year means parents who let their daughters drop out of school to get married can be prosecuted.

In Tajikistan, it has been customary for girls to marry at 16 or even younger. Before it was raised, the official age of consent was 17, but a provision in the civil code allows local authorities to permit marriage below the official minimum age, under in exceptional circumstances.

However, it is common practice to conduct a wedding only according to the Muslim rite, without registering it with the civil authorities. In that case, the wife does not enjoy the normal rights and protections afforded by the law, as she is not technically married in the eyes of the state.

Temur Hafizov, a judge in the Ismoil Somoni district of the capital Dushanbe, says he has seen a clear downward trend in underage marriage cases since 2011.

“Compared with previous years, there’s been a marked reduction, and most of cases of this kind now happen only in rural areas,” he said.

Judge Hafizov cited the example of a trial last year involving a 17-year old girl who was married in a religious ceremony arranged by the two sets of parents.

“As the family members on both sides were religious, they didn’t even invite a cleric, and performed the Muslim marriage rite themselves,” he said.

In November 2013, the girl’s parents and her father-in-law were charged with arranging the marriage of a minor. Her husband was charged marrying a minor. They all pleaded guilty, and were convicted and fined.

The judge noted that the couple continue to live together.

There have several cases across the country in which Muslim clerics were fined or given short prison terms for blessing marriages where the bride was a minor.

Last August, Saidazam Atoev, a former imam in the Bobojon Ghafurov district of the northern Soghd region, was sentenced to one year’s corrective labour for sanctioning the marriage of a 16-year old girl.

Marhabo Zununova, who heads an NGO called Marriage and Family, said her organisation was aware of many cases where girls aged between 15 and 17 had been married off. It was particularly widespread in the countryside, but also took place in towns, she said.

According to Zununova, early marriages are commonest among poor families, as parents hope their daughter will be better off going to live with her in-laws – the normal pattern after marriage.

“The blame must be placed squarely on the parents,” Zununova said. “Girls who have married early say their parents literally forced them into it, often without their consent.”

Firuz Saidov, a sociologist with the government’s Centre for Strategic Studies, said that it was difficult to put a number to underage weddings since most were not registered with the state.

Sairahmon Nazriev, a journalist based in the southern Hatlon region, described how the authorities were trying to enforce the rules.

“The government is strict about requiring Muslim clerics to perform a religious wedding only if the bride and groom produce a marriage certificate proving that they registered with the authorities,” he said. “These days, one needs permission from the local authorities to hold a wedding, for which the passports of the groom and the bride must be produced to confirm that they have attained marriageable age.”

Nazriev said local government implemented the law in most cases, but he also noted reports that some corrupt officials allowed families to obtain a fraudulent marriage certificate showing a higher age.

A resident of Dushanbe who asked to remain anonymous told IWPR that a 15-year-old relative from a village recently married a man from the capital. She was issued with a passport in which her age was raised by three years to make the marriage legal.

“Both families have known each other for a long time and decided to arrange a marriage between their children,” the woman said, adding that she saw nothing wrong with the tradition.

According to Nazriev, some Muslim leaders deliberately ignore the ban.

The leader of a mosque in the southern Khatlon region, who asked to remain anonymous, told IWPR that blessing the union of two young people was a virtuous act that provided a safeguard against immorality.

“It is better for them to enter into marriage than to go down the path of sin,” he said.

Experts says early marriages have many negative effects on the girls themselves, their families and the wider community.

Gulnora Ahmadjonova, an obstetrician, said underage marriages often led to early pregnancies, which had negative outcomes for the young women’s health, and also for their education and future prospects.

“Very often such pregnancies lead to complications,” she said. “Many the girls are forced to stop school after becoming pregnant, and their lack of education hampers their ability to find a proper job.”

Zununova agreed, saying, “Their bodies aren’t ready to bear a child and this leads to problems and [healthcare] costs for treating mothers and children.”

According to Saidov, another early marriage is associated with high rates of divorce. Cited a study which his institute conducted three years ago, he said, “The research showed that because of early pregnancies... their children had health problems, and these difficulties put a strain on the marriage, resulting in its breakdown.”

Supporters of early marriage argue that it is a centuries-old Tajik tradition.

Dushanbe resident Hilvatshoh Mahmud, director of the Ozodagon media group, told IWPR that early marriage did not have to be fraught with problems. His own mother was 14 when she married his father, who was then 20.

“As a result of their marriage, there are 12 of us in the family and we are all healthy, we all studied. Two of my mother’s schoolfriends also married early and they have wonderful families, grandchildren and great-grandchildren,” Mahmud said.

Tahmina, a Dushanbe resident now aged 30, would disagree. She still feels horror and rage at how her parents forced her into marriage when she was only 14.

One summer morning, her mother told her that she was about to get married.

“I was still a child. I was totally unprepared for it and initially it didn’t even sink in. When I was told I was going to be taken to my husband’s home, I took my dolls with me,” Tahmina said. “Every time I saw my friends going to school, I cried.”

Tahmina ran away from her husband after two months of marriage. When they saw how distressed she was, her parents did not force her to go back.

She then had a nervous breakdown. Doctors said they could do nothing to help her, and Tahmina spent days on end sitting in a darkened room, refusing to speak to anyone.

Eventually she recovered, returned to school and went on to university.

When she was 24, she married again, but her new mother-in-law treated her badly because of her past. Things did not improve even after Tahmina and her husband decided to leave for Russia. Her mother-in-law continued to tell her son that he deserved a better wife.

Eventually, they grew apart, and she left him to return to Dushanbe where she found work to support herself and their child.

“I think that if I hadn’t had to undergo the psychological trauma of my first marriage, which ruined my life, everything would have been better,” Tahmina said.

**Nilufar Karimova is an IWPR-contributor in Tajikistan.**

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