

Turkmen Lecturers Prey on Students

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Women forced to give up studies or change subjects because of sexual harassment.

Leila is a quiet, serious young woman from the Charjev Pedagogical Institute, in eastern Turkmenistan. When one of her teachers invited her to visit him to discuss some problems with her thesis, her only thought was for her studies.

“All day I was thinking about what the teacher could have found wrong with my thesis,” she said. “I did not pay any attention to the fact that he invited me to the department after everyone had gone home. And I certainly didn’t expect that instead of going through my thesis, he would throw me onto a table and start pressing himself against me. I tore myself away and ran out of the office.”

But this was only the beginning of Leila’s troubles. “The next day, in the presence of my fellow students, the teacher said that I had to do a lot more work on my thesis,” she continued. “ He reminded me that my thesis was on the same topic as his research, and said that it would be impossible for me to prove that I had not copied from him.”

The teacher did not relent, suggesting that Leila visit him at home, and demanding more meetings late in the day in his office. Leila consulted a lawyer, but this didn’t get her very far. “The lawyer just shrugged and said the case was hopeless, because there were no witnesses or evidence – just my words,” she said. “This teacher had been working in the institute for a long time, and everyone knows him as a respected head of department.”

Leila said that she was afraid to confront the teacher, fearing this might jeopardise her thesis. It was all too much for her in the end and she left the institute.

Sexual harassment of female students on Turkmen campuses is common, but rarely reported because the victims fear censure or the loss of their reputation.

“Most women do not want their professor or supervisor to be fired - they don’t want to live with the feeling of guilt. Women are inclined to blame themselves for everything,” said psychology lecturer Jeren Saparova.

Maiya, a former student at Turkmen State University, had been pursued by the head of her faculty, but rather than bring a complaint against him she decided to study another subject.

“I was a second year student at the law faculty when the dean began openly hinting to me that if I responded to his advances I would not have any problems with my studies. At the same time, he let me know that if I refused, problems would start.”

Maiya said this went on for about a month, “I became irritable and nervous, but I was afraid to tell my husband the reason for my anxiety.

“I decided to transfer to the history department. When my parents found out about my decision, my mother had a heart attack. I had had so much difficulty in enrolling at the prestigious law department that my father had looked for friends to pull strings for me. Only my husband took my decision calmly, saying

that the most important thing was for me to have a higher education.”

Lena, another former student at Turkmen State University, recalls one case of harassment that resulted in tragedy.

“In our dormitory, there was a girl called Tylla. She was from the east of Turkmenistan, and was likeable and modest. One day she did not come to lessons, and no one saw her in the dormitory. They only started looking for her in the evening, knocking on the door of her room. They broke down the door and discovered that she had hanged herself.

“It was later we learned that one of the young teachers at our faculty tried to force her to have intimate relations with him. She was far from being the only woman at the institute to whom this respected teacher had made advances towards.”

According to Lena, Tylla went to the dean’s office and complained about the teacher, but she was accused of leading him on and told to behave more modestly. The teacher was given a severe reprimand, but kept working in the department. Two years have passed since then, and the teacher who caused the tragedy has since been fired. But there were no charges filed against him; instead, unrequited love for a fellow student was given as the reason for Tylla’s suicide.

Location: [Turkmenistan](#)

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