

Uzbek Women Suffer in Silence

Author: [Artur Samari](#)

Men who abuse women evade prosecution because their victims are reluctant to come forward.

“I couldn’t bear it anymore,” Zuhra told IWPR from her bed in the burns ward.

“I realised that my life was never likely to change. I decided it was better to die than suffer more.”

Zuhra, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, was rushed to the hospital in Samarkand, western Uzbekistan, two weeks ago after she set herself alight. It was her third attempt to end her life and escape from beatings at home.

“Several times I complained to the police,” said Zuhra. “The local policeman warned my husband he would be punished.” But no action was taken, and the beatings continued.

Over the last month, in Samarkand alone, doctors have treated five women after they attempted suicide in the same way. All were victims of domestic violence.

Wife battering is nothing new in Uzbekistan. The subservient role of women in this traditional Muslim society has always made them vulnerable to their husbands’ wrath.

The downturn in the country’s economy in recent years has left many men out of work and their accompanying depression, alcoholism, and drug addiction have aggravated the problem.

Ironically, women who’ve sought to improve their families’ living standards by entering the country’s day-labour market have also found themselves exposed to dangers.

Recently, fifteen-year-old Nigora from Tashlak in the Fergana region set out with her friend, Salima, to find work. They were approached by a man named Khairulla who offered them employment in his apple orchard, promising to pay them 3,000 sums, around three US dollars.

But instead of heading to the orchard, the man took them to a house, where he raped Nigora - Salima managed to escape.

Until fairly recently, the idea of women hiring themselves out as labour was unheard of in Uzbekistan, but today they make up the overwhelming majority of Fergana’s 10,000 day-labourers.

Many are traditional housewives forced to take on day work to feed their families. Others are factory workers and teachers who can either no longer support themselves on their meagre salaries, or have simply seen their jobs disappear entirely. All are vulnerable.

“Labour rights are grossly violated in Uzbekistan,” said Abusalom Ergashev, a local representative of the Independent Organisation for Human Rights in Uzbekistan. “Employers hire women, rape them, treating

them as if they had no rights. Even underage girls are raped.”

One of the biggest problems facing those attempting to combat the abuse of women is that very few victims of domestic and workplace violence come forward. In a society that demands sexual purity of women and values honour over justice, doing so often means risking disgrace, divorce, and destitution.

“I thought of my children,” said Zuhra, a mother of six, explaining how she endured years of beatings at the hands of her husband. “My youngest is still in primary school.”

But when her eldest son began to abuse her as well, she could take no more, soaked her dress with petrol and set fire to it.

Psychologists say this shocking form of suicide is not just an act of desperation, but an attempt by the victims to force their tormentors to suffer pangs of guilt. Every year, doctors in Samarkand operate on around 40 women with burns received in such acts. Eighty per cent of them cannot be saved.

Murodil Fozilov, a senior official at the Fergana prosecutor’s office, says they have difficulty bringing cases against abusers because of the victims’ reluctance to make statements. “Above all, they are scared for their family’s honour,” he said.

Even in the case of failed suicides, the victims are wary of talking about their experiences. “They have survived, and so they have to go back home to the people who pushed them to suicide,” said Bibisora Oripova, a surgeon with experience of treating burn victims. “If a woman tells the truth, her relatives take revenge on her.”

But there are suggestions that police are reluctant to conduct thorough inquiries into even the most extreme cases of abuse. In some instances, they attempt to preserve their region’s public image by simply covering up suicides. In other cases, officials give in to pressure from relatives of victims to classify clear-cut cases as accidents.

Salima Kadyrova, an attorney with the Samarkand Centre for Human Rights Initiatives, SCHRI, believes a lack of action on the part of the authorities is largely responsible for perpetuating the cycle of violence.

“If the authorities punished the guilty according to the law, and everything was reported in the press, then men would start to be afraid,” she said. “And the number of [abuse] cases would be greatly reduced.”

But it’s not clear whether legal action would break the deeply entrenched code of silence. And with no signs of an economic recovery on the horizon, the situation for Uzbekistan’s women seems unlikely to improve.

For the time being, they will continue to live with violent husbands and run the gauntlet of the labour markets.

After a week away, Nigora finally returned home to tell her family of her ordeal at the hands of Khairulla. No legal complaint was ever made. Instead, her father met up with her assailant – not to take revenge but, astonishingly, to propose that he marry her.

“What else could we do? He could have been put in jail, but who would have married her then,” her father explained. “It was better for her to become Khairulla’s wife.”

Recovering in hospital, Zuhra is safe for now. But her nightmare will soon begin again.

“She is better now,” her doctor said. “After she recovers, she’ll be able to go home.”

Artur Samari is an independent journalist in Samarkand. Nigora Sadykova is the pseudonym of an independent journalist in Fergana.

Location: [Uzbekistan](#)

Focus: [Central Asia](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uzbek-women-suffer-silence>