



Marriage— or Else

IN AFGHANISTAN, GIRLS AS YOUNG AS 8 CAN BE FORCED INTO MARRIAGE—OFTEN WITH BRUTAL CONSEQUENCES

FAST FACTS

AREA: 251,772 sq mi
(about the size of Texas)

POPULATION: 29 million
(U.S.: 310 million)

PER CAPITA GDP*: \$800
(U.S.: \$46,000)

RELIGIONS: Sunni Muslim, 80%;
Shia Muslim, 19%; other, 1%

LANGUAGES: Pashto, Afghan
Persian, Turkic, others

LITERACY: Males, 43%;
females, 13% (U.S.: 99/99)

LIFE EXPECTANCY: Males,
44 years; females, 44 years
(U.S.: 75/80)

*Per capita gross domestic product is often used as a measure of a nation's wealth.

Words to Know

- **condone** (v): to overlook a wrongdoing
- **developing country** (n): a nation with widespread poverty and little infrastructure
- **flog** (v): to beat with a whip
- **norm** (n): an established standard of behavior

The two Afghan girls had every reason to think the law would be on their side when a policeman at a checkpoint stopped the bus they were riding in.

Disguised in boys' clothing, Khadija, 13, and Basgol, 14, had been traveling for two days along rutted roads and over mountain passes to escape their illegal, forced marriages to much older men. Now they had made it to a more liberal province in the northwestern part of the country, 175 miles from their remote village in central Afghanistan.

But the policeman recognized them as girls, ignored their pleas, and sent them back home, where they were publicly and viciously **flogged** for daring to run away from their husbands.

In another case, Sumbol, 17, was kidnapped and given a choice: marry her tormentor or become a suicide bomber. "He said, 'If you don't marry me, I will put a bomb on your body and send you to the police station,'" Sumbol says.

Criminal by most Western standards, child marriage is common in many parts of Afghanistan, with the government either unable or unwilling to stop it. Although the new

Afghan constitution forbids marriage before age 16, tribal customs often predominate in this central Asian country of 29 million people.

According to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in Washington, D.C., tribal leaders sometimes **condone** marriage for girls as young as 8. Marriage often means the end of the child's education. Girls who refuse or run away can face public beatings, or worse.

"Early marriage and forced marriage are the two most common forms of violent behavior against women and girls," says Fawzia Kofi, a prominent female member of the Afghan Parliament.

The most recent Unicef study found that 43 percent of Afghan women were married before age 18. Poverty is usually a factor, either because a husband pays a large "bride-price" to the family or because marrying off a daughter means one less mouth to feed. In some cases, fathers give their daughters away to settle debts.

That was the case for Sakhina, 15. At age 12 or 13, she was sold into marriage to pay off her **continued on p. 12** →



Sumbol, 17, was kidnapped and given a choice: marry her tormentor or become a suicide bomber.

GLOBE: JIM McMAHON/MAPMAN; RIGHT: ©ALISSA J. RUBIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDOX



Under the Taliban, women had to wear head-to-toe coverings called burqas.

After U.S.-led forces ousted the Taliban in 2001, many girls were allowed to return to school.

Disfigured by her husband's family, Aisha was fitted with a prosthetic nose in Los Angeles.

Afghanistan Is a Transitional Democracy.

The current form of government was established by a constitution adopted in 2004, after the overthrow of the Taliban. Afghanistan held its first elections that year.

The **President**, who heads the **EXECUTIVE BRANCH**, is both head of government and chief of state. The President is elected by the people to a five-year term and is limited to two terms. (In 2009, Hamid Karzai was elected to his second term as President, but there were widespread accusations of fraud.) There are two Vice Presidents.

The **National Assembly** is the **LEGISLATIVE BRANCH**. It has two chambers. The *Wolesi Jirga* (*JUR-guh*), which means House of the People, has 249 members. They are elected to five-year terms. The *Meshrano Jirga* (House of the Elders) has 102 members. Under special circumstances, the government can assemble a *loya jirga* (grand council) to amend the constitution and decide other weighty matters.

The *Stera Mahkama* (**Supreme Court**) heads the **JUDICIAL BRANCH**. The President appoints its nine members, who must be approved by the *Wolesi Jirga*, for 10-year terms.

father's debts. (Birth records are not always kept in Afghanistan and other **developing countries**.) Her husband's family made her a servant. "Every time they could, they found an excuse to beat me," she says. "My brother-in-law, my sister-in-law, my husband—all of them beat me."

Sakhina managed to flee to Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, to a secret shelter run by an organization called Women for Afghan Women (WAW). The group operates five shelters and says that it took in 158 escaped child brides in 2010.

The Role of the Taliban

Law enforcement has either been part of the problem or ineffective in tackling it. As was the case with Khadija and Basgol—the girls who were publicly flogged—the police often return runaway child brides to their families rather than send them to shelters, says Manizha Naderi, the head of WAW. "Most police

don't understand what's in the law, or they're just against it," she says.

Even girls not forced to marry face restrictions in areas of Afghanistan that are ruled by the Taliban. The extreme Islamist group took control of the country in 1996 and imposed its radical

“Every time they could, they found an excuse to beat me.”

version of Islam on the nation. Women had to quit their jobs and wear head-to-toe coverings called *burqas* in public, and girls were no longer allowed to attend school.

Although the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, after the September 11 terrorist attacks, ousted the Taliban from power, the group has re-emerged in parts of the country. As a result, the U.S. and its allies are facing new challenges in a war that has lasted

nearly a decade (*see pp. 14-15*).

Child marriage is not limited to Afghanistan. According to Unicef, about one third of women ages 20 to 24 in the developing world were married before age 18.

Girls from poor families are twice as likely as other children to

be married off—often with tragic consequences. Child brides are at a higher risk for domestic violence and contracting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Child brides also suffer psychologically after being taken from their families, friends, and school, and forced to serve their much older husbands.

Efforts to help runaway child brides have also been hampered by tribal traditions. In Afghanistan, "the community is central to house-

hold survival," says Paula Kantor of ICRW. "If tribal **norms** are 'That girl ran away, she needs to be punished,' a family might feel pressured to respond if that's the way to maintain connections to the community."

Aisha's Story

The most infamous example is that of Aisha (*above*). Married at 12 to a Taliban fighter, Aisha escaped, but her father returned her to her village. There, her husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law—with the approval of the local mullah (Muslim clergyman)—sliced off her nose and both her ears.

"I regret what I did now," Aisha's father says. "I only wanted to try to have good relations with their family despite their bad behavior, so I sent her back to them."

Aisha's story drew global attention when she appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in August. Although it's rare for Afghanistan's police to intervene in villagers' affairs, the outcry pushed them to

act: Aisha's father-in-law—just one of her tormentors—was arrested.

Naderi of WAW says that's at least a step in the right direction: "This arrest gives hope to all Afghan women that their perpetrators will be brought to justice."

But most cases go unpunished. Many Afghan women fear that if U.S. forces leave and the Taliban returns to power, life will be even worse.

"People are very scared," says Kantor, who recently visited Afghanistan. "The international community—we can all leave very easily, and we have no real understanding of the depths of uncertainty people face."

—by Rod Nordland & Alissa J. Rubin in Kabul, Afghanistan

Think About It

1. Why is forced marriage common in Afghanistan?
2. What are the consequences of such marriages?

MapSearch



Afghanistan

On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the United States, killing nearly 3,000 people. The attacks were planned in Afghanistan by Al Qaeda, an Islamist terrorist organization led by Osama bin Laden. Al Qaeda was being sheltered by the Taliban, a radical Muslim group that seized power in Afghanistan in 1996 and ruled the country harshly.

U.S.-led forces attacked Afghanistan in October 2001, quickly overthrowing the Taliban. But in recent years, the Taliban has staged a comeback and once again controls parts of the country.

Study the map and series of events below, then answer these questions.

Questions

Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Why did the U.S. invade Afghanistan in 2001?
2. What mountain chain straddles part of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border?
3. What Afghan city is located near 34°N, 69°E?
4. What is Afghanistan's longest river?
5. Why do you suppose Iran is supporting both President Karzai and the Taliban?



Iran's radical Islamist government plays both sides of the conflict in Afghanistan. It gives arms to Taliban fighters and money to Karzai's government.

Nuclear threats: India and Pakistan are both nuclear powers, and Iran is defying the U.S. and the U.N. in its efforts to become one.

Pakistan's remote north-western region is a refuge for Afghan insurgents and Al Qaeda. U.S. air attacks have killed terrorists but also civilians.

The U.S. & Afghanistan

2001: 9/11

A month after the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush orders an invasion of Afghanistan. U.S.-led forces have remained in the region ever since.



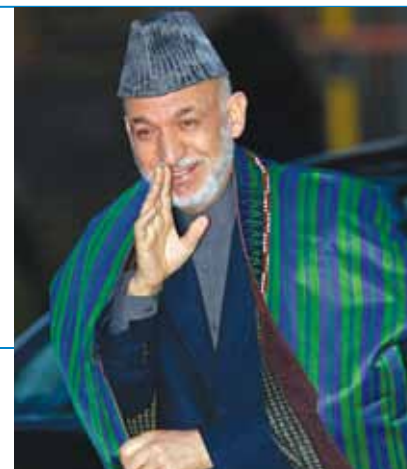
LATE 2001: REGIME CHANGE

U.S.-led forces soon topple the Taliban, but Osama bin Laden escapes into the mountains near Pakistan's border. With the Taliban gone, restrictions are eased on Afghans, especially women. Girls are allowed to return to school.



2004: ELECTIONS

Hamid Karzai is elected President in democratic elections. Re-elected in 2009, he has proved unable to rebuild the nation, halt corruption, or stop a resurgent Taliban.



2009: MORE TROOPS

President Barack Obama, shown here visiting U.S. soldiers in Kabul, sends 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, bringing the total to 100,000. Obama says that U.S. forces will start to withdraw in July 2011. More than 1,470 Americans have been killed in the war to date.

