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No Justice, 'No Value' for Women in a Lawless Afghan Province

By MUJIB MASHAL and ZAHRA NADER

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Belqis, left, and Emam Qul in Ghor Province. Their daughter, Aziz Gul, was killed by villagers who accused her of adultery, and buried before her parents could see her body.

There are three versions of how Tabaruk, a mother of six, died this spring during a journey through treacherous snow-covered mountains in Afghanistan.

She and her family had been expelled from their village in Ghor Province because her teenage daughter, Mah Yamsar, was said to have brought dishonor by becoming pregnant out of wedlock.

The police in Ghor say Tabaruk fell off her horse and died.

Members of the provincial council and human rights activists say she was pushed off a cliff, and then tied to a horse and dragged around until dead.

A third version of the story was told to Mah Yamsar by her 8-year-old brother, who was traveling with Tabaruk at the time. “They killed my mother with the bullets of a gun,” the brother recounted.

If Afghanistan is one of the worst places to be a woman, then Ghor, a province so lawless that people often wonder if there is a government there at all, may be the country’s capital of gender-based violence and abuse. Week after week there are reports of women abused or killed in Ghor by men who never face justice.

“There have been 118 registered cases of violence against women in Ghor in the past year, and those are only cases that have been reported,” said Fawzia Koofi, head of the women’s rights commission in the Afghan Parliament, who recently visited Ghor to raise awareness about the lack of justice. “And not a single suspect in these 118 cases has been arrested.”



An ID photo of Aziz Gul, provided to The New York Times by her family.

“There is no value for women there,” Ms. Koofi added. “It is as if she deserves to die.”

With a population of over 700,000 and located in west-central Afghanistan, Ghor is considered one of the most deprived provinces of the country. It has received little government attention over the years, and the rule of law is almost nonexistent in certain parts of the territory. Ghor also shares borders with some of the most violent provinces with strong Taliban presence, making it vulnerable to the insurgency.

Some of the cases in Ghor briefly shock the nation before fading into its long history of abuse.

A teenage girl, Rukhshana, who was forced into an arranged marriage, was later caught fleeing with a lover. She was buried waist deep in dirt and stoned to death in October 2015 by a gang of men the government said were Taliban. The male lover was flogged and set free.

“From her waist up, the rocks had ripped her body and some piece of stones had made it inside her ribs,” said Hanifa, Rukhshana’s mother. “The blood would not stop. There were 12 other women in the room helping me wash her” in preparation for burial, she said.

Aziz Gul, 19, was shot at night and buried before her parents could even see her body.

Police records said she was also fleeing with a man, reportedly a lover, to avoid a forced marriage, when she was caught by a mob and killed on the spot last June. But her parents said she was abducted from her uncle’s house, and after she was recovered villagers accused her of adultery and then shot her.

“They killed her around night prayer, and I heard the news at dawn prayer,” her mother, Belqis, said. “By that time they had buried the body already.”

In the most recent case, a woman named Suraya was trying to flee what she said was an abusive forced marriage of four years. She left in March with her lover and an elderly aunt, who accompanied them to help them avoid suspicion. All three were chased by heavily armed villagers and killed. Their charred bodies remained in the open for days; villagers threatened anyone who would come to pick them up.

Ms. Koofi, the lawmaker, said the violence had its roots in tribal feuds and the pervasive practice of marrying off girls at a very young age for large dowries. By the time the husband-to-be comes up with the money, often after years of labor in Iran, the girl has grown up and developed feelings for someone else.



An image from a video that recorded the stoning of an Afghan teenager in Ghor province in October 2015. The girl, Rukhshana, who was forced into an arranged marriage, was caught fleeing with her lover. She was buried in the dirt to her waist and stoned to death; her lover was flogged then released.

Also playing a crucial role in the violence, Ms. Koofi said, is the absence of the rule of law and a complete sense of impunity.

When security officials are pressed on the situation in Ghor, Ms. Koofi said, they say they have to balance justice with security — and that if they go after the perpetrators, they will side with the Taliban who are already gaining ground in the province.

This sense that the province's misogyny and injustice would be tolerated as a compromise for stability was underscored when President Ashraf Ghani decided not to support a female governor he sent to the province after she faced resistance. The governor, Seema Joyenda, was ousted at the end of 2015, within six months of her arrival, and that move may have further cemented a feeling of impunity among fundamentalists.

There are other episodes that raise questions about the government's commitment to trying to stop, or at least punish, the killing of women in the province.

Mullah Saadyar, one of the militant leaders listed on police documents as ordering the stoning of Rukhshana, recently came for treatment for an illness in Ghor's provincial capital, Chaghcharan, but the government did not arrest him.

No one has yet been prosecuted for the death of Tabaruk, either.

In the months before she died, Tabaruk, who, like many Afghans used only one name, was focused on protecting her daughter from her own almost certain death.

The daughter, Mah Yamsar, says she was at home last year when a neighbor, Sayed Ahmad, raped her. She hid the episode from everyone, until her body started changing, and she realized she was pregnant. Her mother became her secret-bearer and helper. In rural Afghanistan, it is common for such pregnancies to end in honor killings.



Rukshana's family during an interview in Ghor province. (From right: Muhammad Ibrahim Rukshana's brother; Abdul Karim, her father; Bas Bibi, her sister; Hanifa, her mother; and Aftab, her sister.) "From her waist up, the rocks had ripped her body and some piece of stones had made it inside her ribs," Hanifa said of her daughter's death by stoning. "The blood would not stop."

Mr. Ahmad had pills delivered to Mah Yamsar that would help her have an abortion, which occurred in the seventh month of her pregnancy.

Mah Yamsar went to the hospital and stayed there for eight nights, needing two blood transfusions.

When she was discharged and returned to her village in the Dawlat Yar district of Ghor, elders gathered for a council to decide the family's fate. Tabaruk and her husband were in attendance, as was Mr. Ahmad, the accused rapist, but Mah Yamsar was not.

"He said, 'I won't swear on the Quran, but I did not rape her,'" Mah Yamsar said her mother told her about Mr. Ahmad's words at the meeting.

The village council, swayed by Mr. Ahmad's powerful relatives, said Mah Yamsar's family had brought dishonor on the village. "Load up, and leave this place," the family was told.

Mah Yamsar, still recovering from the abortion, was put on a motorcycle. Her mother rode a horse, while her father, her brother and two village elders, both men, followed behind.

Mah Yamsar arrived ahead of her family in Kharsang, also in Ghor, where the family planned to start a new life. Her mother never made it.

At first, her father said Tabaruk would come. Then he said she had fallen off the horse and died.

But her brother said their father was lying. His father and the two village elders took Tabaruk off into the distance, telling him to stay behind. When they returned, his father said Tabaruk had fallen off the horse.

But the child told Mah Yamsar he heard gunshots.