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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“WHY THE ‘BARBARIC’ PRACTICE OF STONING IS STILL USED IN AFGHANISTAN” BY PARASTOO SAQIB

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



Parastoo is a writer at Afghan Women’s News Agency. Her piece is part of “Sahar Speaks,” a project by Amie Ferris-Rotman for The Huffington Post that provides Afghan female journalists with training, mentoring and publishing opportunities for a global audience.

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In the twenty-first century, Afghans are still being stoned to death, most of them women. They are being punished according to outdated religious teachings and beliefs, which are gaining popularity as the environment worsens for Afghan women. And with the security vacuum caused by the pull-out of international troops, and with more areas of Afghanistan falling under militant control, this barbaric tactic may become more common.

Last year's stoning of 19-year-old Rukhshana, who attempted to run away with her lover after being forced to marry someone else against her will, in the remote province of Ghor, sent shockwaves around the country, particularly among civil society groups, who have established a solid presence since the ousting of the Taliban in 2001.

"Those who carry out stoning are war criminals, they belong to ISIS and the Taliban," rights activist Wida Saghari told me. She called stoning the "most basic kind of religious punishment." Local officials said Taliban militants were responsible for Rukhshana's killing. In accordance with religious law, the 22-year-old man with whom she eloped was flogged but not killed, as he was unmarried.

There are no accurate statistics on the stoning of women in Afghanistan, since most incidents occur in remote villages, and are carried out with the approval of the village elders. But the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission estimates that in 2015, three women, including Rukhshana, were stoned to death in Afghanistan, in areas out of government control. A lawyer familiar with the cases, but who spoke on condition of anonymity, backed up the claims.

Stoning is a punishment reserved for adultery, and involves placing the alleged perpetrator in a ditch. Men gather around and throw stones at the person until he or she dies. According to Islamic law, there must be four eyewitnesses to the alleged adultery.

Though officially banned in Afghanistan, the practice is revered by some Islamic scholars and teachers, who say it has a justified place in Islam. “Whether it’s the Taliban or Daesh (also known as ISIS) — the only way to gain power is to claim it from a very particular part of religion, and only in the areas they deem necessary,” wrote Zainab Salbi, an Iraqi-American author and founder of Women for Women International, shortly after Rukhshana’s killing. “And to these groups, women are the lowest denominator, used to prove their masculinity and their claim to power — to themselves and to the world.”

As late as 2013, Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan’s president at the time, proposed reintroducing stoning as a punishment, but backed down after he was met with international condemnation.

The election of Ashraf Ghani as president the following year has not led to much improvement in the area of violence against women. Earlier this year, Human Rights Watch said Afghan women and teens in jails are often subjected to humiliating and invasive “virginity tests.” Most Afghan women behind bars have been accused of moral crimes, such as running away with a lover or fleeing an abusive relationship.

A 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women law has still not been properly implemented. Ghani also promised during his campaign to appoint more women to senior official roles, but he is yet to deliver.

He oversaw the resignation of Sima Joyenda, who was forced to step down as governor of Ghor late last year after Rukhshana’s murder. The province is extremely volatile and large swathes are controlled by the Taliban. Joyenda was one of two female provincial governors in the country and was repeatedly threatened by religious figures and extremists. She has since been appointed deputy provincial governor of Kabul.

"After I was terminated without reason, violence against women in Ghor reached fever pitch," Joyenda told me over the phone. "Now, none of the judiciary follows up on cases. Recently a dead woman was found, her body was cut up into bits, and stuffed into a bag," Joyenda said, adding that Rukhshana's family has since fled the province, without any protection.

Afghan civil society worries that the ultra-conservative Islamic way of life is encroaching on the country once again.

Prominent religious scholar Sayed Jafar Adeli Hussaini believes stoning is necessary and should be allowed in Afghanistan, as it is in Islam. "Stoning is aimed at curbing the prevalence of prostitution and illegitimate sexual relations," he told me. "It prevents children's lives from going downhill," he told me.

We meet in central Kabul in my office. Dressed in a long trench coat, Hussaini weighs his words carefully.

He said that "some people" resort to strange measures and methods to make the "divinely prescribed punishment of stoning seem un-Islamic" by playing on people's sentimentality. "Islam allows stoning so that no married man or woman would allow themselves to even think about engaging in illegitimate sexual relations," he said.

Under Ghani's rule, a state court last year overturned several hard sentences handed down to those behind the brutal mob murder of religious teacher **Farkhunda** in central Kabul. The 27-year-old was falsely accused of burning the Quran, and was subsequently mauled to death by crowds of men, who also threw stones at her. Maulavi Inayatullah Baleegh, a pro-government mullah and one of the leaders of the inquiry, condoned the stoning, saying adulterers must be punished this way.

Farkhunda's murder marked a turning point in Afghan women's battle for more rights. Hundreds of people, both women and men, took to the streets in protest, and women broke with Afghan tradition by carrying her coffin. A large black stone monument has been erected in her memory at the site of her horrific demise. Her un-battered face is etched on the front, and a clenched fist of solidarity crowns its top.



Photo portraits courtesy of Joel van Houdt.



