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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“WHAT IT’S LIKE TO BE MARRIED AT 7 YEARS OLD” BY SHOUGOFA ALIKOZAY

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.



Shougofa is a writer at AWWP. 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.

For this 37-year-old mother of five, life is the picture of enforced marriage: she barely scrapes by on less than a dollar a day and cannot afford to take any of her children to school.

“I don’t want my daughter to suffer the same limitations and problems I have. I want her to marry when she is old enough, not in her childhood,” Spengul’s mom tells me when we meet in her mud and clay house in the dusty village of Pol-e-Charkhi, on Kabul’s outskirts. She abides by a rural Afghan tradition of not using her own name, and instead is called after her first-born child.

Spengul’s mom was married at just 7 years old to a man then in his mid-20s. For her impoverished family, the marriage offered some financial relief and a form of protection. “I was a child. How could I be happy?” she says. “How can a child without her mom and dad be happy in a strange house?”



Spengul’s mom hopes her daughters, such as 2 year old Zarmina, will have a better life than her. (Photo: Shougofa Alikozay)

But her husband turned out to be mentally unstable and addicted to opium, meaning she suffered neglect, unbearable loneliness and heartbreak. As soon as she started menstruating, at age 13, she conceived their first child. But with her adolescent body not fully developed and prepared for birth, and with no money for food and medicine, the baby boy did not have much of a chance. He died after a mere four months.

As is common in underage mothers, Spengul’s mom suffered physically after her first birth, and did not have another child for some time. Girls who give birth under the age of 18 can face many problems, including diabetes, anemia and heart disease, health experts say. She was lucky to have survived, especially as she was under the age of 15: Afghanistan has the **highest rate of maternal mortality in the world**, largely owing to the custom of enforced marriage of young girls and women. Poverty and a lack of sufficient calories worsen the problem. Afghanistan has **the fourth worst mortality rate** for children under 5 in the world, after **Angola, Benin and Chad**, with some 101 children dying for every 1,000 live births, according to UNICEF.

Spengul’s mom was left bereft and physically unwell after her first baby died. Only after her husband threatened to take a new wife, some years later, did she have more children, including her adored 11-year-old Spengul. “I am happy I have my children. That is it. Otherwise, there is no happiness in my life,” she tells me.



*A view of Pol-e-Charkhi, as seen from near the house of Spengul's mom.
(Photo: Shougofa Alikozay)*

“My husband was not well in the head. He didn’t buy us anything. He was not a normal human being. He was addicted to opium throughout our marriage,” Spengul’s mom says as she looks after her three girls and two boys, who are wearing threadbare clothing and are clearly malnourished. The youngest is 3 years old. They play in the family’s enclosed yard, their hair matted with dirt.

Her husband left the family two and a half years ago without a trace. “He vanished,” she says, adding that she thinks he could be dead. “I never did find his body.”

She now lives with her in-laws, eking out a living by washing raisins. For one big bowl of raisins, called kasa, she receives 50 Afghanis, or about 80 cents. It takes her a full day to clean one kasa. Some days her children eat, other days they don’t.

Within impoverished Pol-e-Charkhi, Spengul’s mom and her children are the poorest family in the neighborhood. The houses there are small, damaged and old. When her father died, her mother was forced to marry another man. Besides the money she earns from cleaning raisins, the only support she receives is from her father-in-law, who collects empty Pepsi bottles, which he recycles for small amounts of money.

The future for Afghanistan’s children looks bleak. With foreign troops all but pulled out, a widening security vacuum, political instability and fewer donors threaten to reverse a decade of hope and better education. “Unfortunately, in recent years, financial assistance to Afghanistan has reduced, and awareness around underage marriage has decreased,” said Freshta Karimi, founder and director of Da Qanoon Ghushtonky, one of the country’s largest legal aid services.

Despite a 2009 law criminalizing child marriage – the official age is 16 for girls and 18 for men – the practice continues and perpetrators are rarely caught. “Child marriage is accepted as part of the Afghan way of life, of the identity and traditions of Afghan people,” Karimi said.

For Spengul’s mom, such a way of life is filled with misery. When her children are sick, she occasionally gets free treatment at the clinic, but they mostly have to tolerate their illnesses. She bemoans being married at such a young age, and how it has impacted her own children’s lives. When I ask her if she will buy clothes for her children for the Afghan New Year, as is the custom, she replies, “I am worried how I am going to get the soap I need to wash their old clothes.”

But occasionally, a large smile spreads across her face. She dreams of being able to take her children to school. “My daughter’s biggest ambition in life is to have a notebook, and to be able to write in it.”

Photo portraits courtesy of Joel van Houdt.

