

Violence stalks women workers in Afghanistan

Tuesday 2 October 2012, by [FERRIS-ROTMAN Amie](#) (Date first published: 29 September 2012).

(Reuters) - Muzhgan Masoomi's attacker stabbed her 14 times with a thick blade used to slaughter animals, tearing wide gashes in her flesh before leaving the government worker for dead on the outskirts of the Afghan capital.

With a severe limp and no control over her bladder - caused by the blade scraping her spinal cord - the 22-year-old can no longer work at the Ministry of Public Works, where she was a financial assistant before the assault.

Women who pursue careers in ultra-conservative Afghanistan often face opposition in a society where often they are ostracised - or worse, brutalised - for mixing with men other than husbands or relatives.

Despite commitments to better the rights of women 11 years into the NATO-led war, some say the authorities need to do more to prevent violence against women who work, particularly in government roles.

There are now fears that as the 2014 deadline looms for most foreign troops to leave, opportunities for women in the public sphere could shrink as confidence weakens in the face of continuing violence.

"I have no enemies, no links to gangs, and look what has happened to me. The situation for women in this country is getting worse day by day," Masoomi told Reuters in her brightly lit home, a few minutes' walk from where she was stabbed.

Shaking her long black ponytail, Masoomi said of her assailant: "He didn't like women working out of the house". He threatened her with menacing phone calls and text messages in the months leading up to the attack.

Her parents said the attacker, a relative who worked as a policeman, was now behind bars over the stabbing.

The security concerns of male government workers are taken more seriously than those of women, said Colonel Sayed Omar Saboor, deputy director for gender and human rights at the Interior Ministry.

"Women who work are much bigger targets than men and the government needs to acknowledge this," Saboor said.

How well female government workers are protected was called into question in July when a suicide bomber targeted and killed Hanifa Safi, regional head of women's affairs in eastern Laghman province.

Authorities ignored repeated requests for protection, her family said afterwards. Laghman officials

declined to comment.

“She was so worried about her future. The only time someone in the police even addressed the issue of her security was once the Taliban had killed her,” said her son, Mohammad Tabriz Safi, 30.

NO SUPPORT

Officially the government must provide security - usually two bodyguards - for ministers, members of parliament and tribal elders, said Interior Ministry spokesman Sediq Sediqqi.

But women not in those senior roles, such as Safi or Masoomi, are in dire need of protection simply because of their gender, Saboor said.

But Sediqqi said it would be “very difficult” for the police to provide security and guards for everyone who works in government. There are about 74,000 women out of 363,000 state employees.

Muzhgan has only recently gathered enough strength to talk about her ordeal, which happened in late March.

With a degree in accounting and some English, Masoomi was a valuable asset to her ministry, where she worked on a UN-funded Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme, bringing former Taliban fighters from the battlefield back into jobs.

But she said not a single person from her ministry came to help her, or gave encouragement after the attack.

“They didn’t even come to see me. Financially, morally, I got nothing,” she said, adding that members of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) took her to the hospital.

If she does not soon go abroad for surgery, she may never be able to work again. The ministry’s deputy, Ahmad Farhad Waheed, said it had asked ISAF to look after her treatment, but the force said it was not down to them.

Afghan women have won back basic rights in education, voting and employment since the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001, but there is concern such freedoms will not be protected and may even be traded away as Kabul seeks a peace deal with the group.

“If a political solution between the Taliban and the government is reached, there is no doubt that women will need to be better protected,” said Maria Bashir, the chief prosecutor for Herat province bordering Iran.

The only female prosecutor general in the country, Bashir has been threatened repeatedly and come under attack twice, when her house was set alight and another one firebombed.

Eight bodyguards escort Bashir to work each day, and six live in her house. All are paid for by the international community, she said.

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P.S.

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