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Ghor Warlords Accused of Abusing Women

Local warlords in the northwestern Afghan province of Ghor have taken to abducting and assaulting women with impunity, as no one dares confront them.

IWPR has gathered evidence from provincial government officials, police and residents of Ghor, who report that numerous grave human rights abuses are being committed by militia forces which in theory are not even supposed to exist any more.

The abuses they are accused of include assault, coerced marriage and public beatings for alleged immoral behaviour.

Alauddin, 35, a resident of Taywara in the south of the province, said his brother was forced to give his daughter away in marriage to a powerful local militia commander.

The commander threatened the family with assault and death if they refused. Alauddin said he was reluctant to report the case, even though he was aware the man was beating his new wife.

"We know that all these individuals are supported by the government. Some of them call themselves national police and some local police, and they are all supported by high government officials. In fact, no one trusts the government, because there is no government."

Mohammad Sharif, a tribal elder in the Dawlatyar district, recalled a case where a man was killed in spring last year, and his wife was abducted by a local commander and murdered a month later. No action had been taken on either killing since, he said.

"Government forces in the district are fully aware of the crime, but since the commander is powerful and influential, they are unable to arrest and prosecute him," he said.

Anjila Shafi, secretary of the provincial council of Ghor. Shafi said that in the past year, 50 cases of violence against women by militia commanders had been recorded, including assault and coerced marriages.

General Bashir said police had received 20 reports of acts of violence allegedly committed by commanders in the Chaharsada, Tayvara and Dowlina districts, but he acknowledged this was likely to be an understatement of the true situation because people were too scared to complain. The intimidations in turn allowed the perpetrators to carry on with impunity, he added.

In one case, he said, "An influential individual in Taywara district forced a father to give his daughter away to a 40 year old man. When district officials tried to secure her

release the girl, the commander prevented them by force of arms."

A provincial council member who asked to remain anonymous said that in recent weeks, two girls who were forced into marriage in Tayvara district committed suicide.

"A local commander had forcibly married one of the girls himself, and the other to someone else," the councillor said.

Islam forbids coerced marriages. Mawlawi Hafizullah, a religious scholar in Ghor, said that when such cases were discovered, the government must take action against those responsible.

In three cases, militia commanders stand accused of ordering extrajudicial punishments of women.

General Abdul Rashid Bashir, the chief of police for the province, said a militia commander in Tulak district ordered public lashings of two women.

"The police found out about the incident ten days later, but to date, they have been unable to do anything about it," the police chief said, arguing that effective action against these powerful men would remain impossible until central government stepped in.

Shafi of Ghor's provincial council alleged that Fazel Ahmad, an influential commander in Dowlina "lashed a woman for allegedly having a sexual relationship with a man in the district".

Once again, nothing was done about the case, she said.

IWPR spoke to Fazel Ahmad, who said that men under his command did carry out the beating.

"Last year, my men identified a 40-year-old woman whose husband had died and who had sexual relations with another man," he said. "She was lashed in public so that other women and men would learn a lesson from it. This will prevent prostitution occurring in the area."

Such cases are reminiscent of the arbitrary punishments carried out by the Taleban.

Armed groups operating outside the law continue to operate across parts of Afghanistan, but because they are not fighting the government, their violent actions are often overshadowed by the killings committed by the Taleban and allied insurgents.

Militia groups, many of them part of the mujahedin that fought the Soviet-backed government in the 1980s, had free rein to set up their own fiefdoms in the chaotic civil war of the early 1990s. Their brutal and lawless behaviour was one reason why many Afghans initially welcomed the rise of the Taleban at the time.

These armed units, often affiliated with a political faction, were supposed to have been eliminated under the post-Taleban dispensation after 2001. The United Nations sponsored a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration process, and when that ended in 2005, a second programme called Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups specifically targeted the large number of informal units that remained, such as those that seem to have survived unscathed in Ghor.

As Alauddin suggested, some militia forces may have reemerged under the pretence that they are part of the Afghan Local Police initiative, which is intended to formalise the status and command structure of a range of village defence forces. (Last year, IWPR reported on abuses committed by groups of this kind in Herat, Badghis and Ghor

provinces – see [Afghan Village Militias Accused of Abuses](#)

[2] - and more recently in Balkh, also in the north; see ["Rogue Police" Complaints in Afghan North](#). [3]

Women rights activists say they are unable to work in the remoter parts of Ghor because of the presence of long strongmen as well as more general security problems.

Atifa Mansuri, a women's rights activist in western Afghanistan, said warlords were now a major threat to women there, but that "no government institution has ever been able to arrest or prosecute the perpetrators of such actions".

Mansuri said women would continue to fall prey to powerful and violent men until the government established itself properly in these areas, and began prosecuting alleged perpetrators.

Zia Ahmadi is a freelance reporter in Herat province.

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