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## Afghan girls traded for debts, blood feuds

By Alisa Tang, Associated Press Writer

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JALALABAD, Afghanistan — Unable to scrounge together the US\$165 he needed to repay a loan to buy sheep, Nazir Ahmad made good on his debt by selling his 16-year-old daughter to marry the lender's son.

"He gave me nine sheep," Ahmad said, describing his family's woes since taking the loan. "Because of nine sheep, I gave away my daughter."

Seated beside him in the cramped compound, his daughter Malia's eyes filled with tears. She used a black scarf to wipe them away.

Despite advances in women's rights and at least one tribe's move to outlaw the practice, girls are traded like currency in Afghanistan and forced marriages are common. Antiquated tribal laws authorize the practice known as "bad" in the Afghan language Dari — and girls are used to settle disputes ranging from debts to murder.

Such exchanges bypass the hefty bride price of a traditional betrothal, which can cost upward of US\$1,000. Roughly two out of five Afghan marriages are forced, says the country's Ministry of Women's Affairs.

"It's really sad to do this in this day and age, exchange women," said Manizha Naderi, the director of the aid organization [Women for Afghan Women](#). "They're treated as commodities."

Though violence against women remains widespread, Afghanistan has taken significant strides in women's rights since the hard-line Taliban years, when women were virtual prisoners — banned from work, school or leaving home unaccompanied by a male relative. Millions of girls now attend school and women fill jobs in government and media.

There are also signs of change for the better inside the largest tribe in eastern Afghanistan — the deeply conservative Shinwaris.

Shinwari elders from several districts signed a resolution this year outlawing several practices that harm girls and women. These included a ban on using girls to settle so-called blood feuds — when a man commits murder, he must hand over his daughter or sister as a bride for a man in the victim's family. The marriage ostensibly "mixes blood to end the bloodshed." Otherwise, revenge killings often continue between the families for generations.

Jan Shinwari, a businessman and provincial council member, said a BBC radio report by a female journalist from the Shinwari tribe, Malalai Shinwari, had exposed the trade of girls and shamed the elders into passing the resolution to end the practice.

"I did this work not because of human rights, but for Afghan women, for Afghan girls not to be exchanged

Yes  No

Yes  No

Yes  No

for stupid things," Jan Shinwari said. "When Malalai Shinwari reported this story about exchanging girls for animals, when I heard this BBC report, I said, 'Let's make a change.'"

Now a lawmaker in Parliament, Malalai Shinwari said her report had the impact she intended. She called the changes to tribal laws a "big victory for me."

About 600 elders from the Shinwar district put their purple thumbprint "signatures" on the handwritten resolution.

More than 20 Shinwari leaders gathered in the eastern city of Jalalabad, nodding earnestly and muttering their consent as the changes were discussed last week.

They insisted that women given away for such marriages — including those to settle blood feuds — were treated well in their new families. But the elders declined requests to meet any of the women or their families.

"Nobody treats them badly," Malik Niaz said confidently, stroking his long white beard. "Everyone respects women."

But Afghan women say this could not be further from the truth.

"By establishing a family relationship, we want to bring peace. But in reality, that is not the case," said Hangama Anwari, an independent human rights commissioner and founder of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation.

The group investigated about 500 cases of girls given in marriage to settle blood feuds and found only four or five that ended happily. Much more often, the girl suffered for a crime committed by a male relative, she said.

"We punish a person who has done nothing wrong, but the person who has killed someone is free. He can move freely, and he can kill a second person, third person because he will never be punished," Anwari said.

A girl is often beaten and sometimes killed because when the family looks at her, they see the killer. "Because they lost someone, they take it out on her," Naderi said.

There are no reliable statistics on blood feud marriages, a hidden practice. When it happens, the families and elders often will not reveal details of the crime or the punishment.

Several years ago in nearby Momand Dara district, a taxi driver hit a boy with his car, killing him. The boy's family demanded a girl as compensation, so the driver purchased an 11-year-old named Fawzia from an acquaintance for US\$5,000 and gave her to the dead boy's relatives, according to the Afghan Women's Network office in Jalalabad.

Three years ago, Fawzia was shot to death, according to a two-page report kept in a black binder of cases of violence against women.

The story of Malia and the nine sheep illustrates the suffering of girls forced into such marriages.

Malia listened as her father described how he was held hostage by his lender, Khaliq Mohammad, because he could not come up with the money to pay for the sheep, which Ahmad had sold to free a relative seized because of another of Ahmad's debts.

Ahmad was released only when he agreed to give Malia's hand in marriage to the lender's 18-year-old son. Asked how she felt about it, Malia shook her head and remained silent. Her face then crumpled in anguish and she wiped away tears.

Asked if she was happy, she responded halfheartedly, "Well, my mother and father agreed ... " Her voice trailed off, and she cried again.


Does she want to meet her husband-to-be? She clicked her tongue — a firm, yet delicate "tsk" — with a barely perceptible shake of her head.

The answer was no.

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