

The Silent Epidemic and the Stoning of Shemisve Allack

As the clouds of war gather over south eastern Turkey, a silent epidemic is underway. It is not caused by the Patriot missiles, that now bristle around most of the cities here. Nor does it have anything to do with the trainloads of American supplies that come east every day. Nor is the epidemic caused by the Turkish tanks that are flowing south to the Iraqi border. But for many people - it is far more painful and important than any war.

The young women are killing themselves.

In the last few years, government statistics show the number of young women committing suicide in this region has sky rocketed.

Mustafa Seven in the town of Batman is on the front lines of the fight against this phenomena. He has established an anti-suicide hot line: social programs for young women and he actively fights against it. At first Mr. Seven seems like an unlikely campaigner: he is disc jockey from the local FM radio station. But he was dragged into the battle when late one night he received a call from a young woman. "She asked me to play a song, one last time. I asked her what she meant." Recalls Mr. Seven. "Then she told me that she was locked in her room, with a handgun and was going to kill herself." Mustafa Seven spent the next hours frantically talking to the woman. "Her family was banging at her door. But they were part of the problem. They were forcing her to marry someone she didn't want to."

Mr. Seven was eventually able to stop the girl from killing herself. He then persuaded the family to allow her to marry the man of her choice: but it was one small victory in a losing war.

"My first protest was I tried to commit suicide. Because my father made me marry one of my cousins. I did not love him, I did not even like him! My father tried to force me to marry. I was twelve years old. So I tried to take chemicals - pills. Then that do not work, so I tried to cut my wrists".

Fatima Vardan is a tall, attractive woman in her early twenties. Yet her hands are covered in nicotine stains and her eyes move everywhere as she talks. She is one of the patients at clinic partly established with Mustafa Seven's help. But Fatima Vardan is part of a larger and unique phenomena in this part of the world. Government statistics show that the suicide rate is actually lower here than most societies. However, there is a difference, in most countries far more men kill themselves than woman. Here the situation is reversed: women kill themselves at a rate almost twice that of men.

Why? There are plenty of theories: plenty of opinions and plenty of academic studies. But no one has cracked the essential mystery: of the female suicides here, over fifty percent seem to have no motivation. They leave no note or message. And the women have no previous history of mental illness or hospitalization.

Ironically, even though he is part of the media industry, Mustafa Seven lays part of the blame on television.

"For the first time these young women are seeing a reality outside of their own. They watch this wonderful, colourful life on television, then they switch it off - and their real life begins: a life of greyness and no choice."

Other people blame the suicides on the human rights violations of the Turkish army.

"Of course people kill themselves!" says Rehan Yarkishda, a Kurdish human rights lawyer in the nearby city of Diyarbakir. "The Turkish government forced three million people to move from their villages. Thousands of people have been killed or tortured. Many more have been jailed for doing things like listening to Kurdish music. The pressure and stress on the society is incredible. Why wouldn't people kill themselves under these circumstances?"

But Ozlem Ozturk thinks they both have it wrong.

"Investigate these deaths properly – you would find they are not suicides but murders."

She is head of the local women's centre. A lot of her job is spent counseling women on the run from the so called "honour killings".

"The cases are incredible." She says, "One girl wanted to go to the movies by herself. Her family thought she had a boyfriend, so they killed her. Another girl dedicated a song on the radio - so her family killed her. Now these people and the government say our young girls are killing themselves. No! It is that our police have just not bothered to investigate them properly."

It is hard to disagree with her when you come to the Dicle Hospital on the outskirts of Diyarbakir, overlooking the headwaters of the Tigris River. Saturday is visiting day. And at one clock the doors open and hundreds of people stream in to see their relatives. There are so many that they cannot use the elevators. So a human river of people pours up the stairs: some in suits and ties, others in the traditional Kurdish turbans and jodhpurs.

But no one will visit Shemsiye Allak. She lies alone in the hospital bed. Her head shaved. Tubes coming out of her mouth. She drifts in and out of consciousness. To know her story is to understand why many women here chose death or have it chosen for them.

Seven months ago Shemsiye Allack lived alone in her house with her father. A neighbour - Hilel Achen a 60 year old man visited - and raped her. She got pregnant. Her family met. They decided that they both of them should die. Her brothers killed the man in front of his son. Then the whole family gathered together and took Shemsiye Allack to an abandoned quarry. There they stoned her until she lay crumpled, and unconscious on the

ground. By a miracle she survived and now she lies abandoned and alone in Dicle Hospital.

"She is living death." declares her doctor. "She will be handicapped for life. But now her whole family has abandoned her. Who will look after her?"

It is not only the family that has deserted Shemsiye Allack. The Allacks are a large and strong local clan. So the local newspaper refused to publish any articles on the stoning. The Kurdish political party which runs the town is afraid of losing votes, so it largely prefers to stay clear of a public stance on the case: And on the day I visited the trial of the men who stoned her - the government prosecutor was "unavoidably absent". Mustafa Seven is an exception in his willingness to speak out about problems

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The city of Batman was dark when I left it - the rain clouds swept over the city, mingling with the oil smoke and exhaust that washed the city. But the phone rang a few moments before the bus pulled up. It was Mustafa Seven - phoning from the city hospital. Another girl - 19 years old - had just committed suicide. No one had any idea why....

Personal Background:

I have been a journalist with Canada's top rated investigative program "the fifth estate" for the eight years. Some of the documentaries that I have worked on with colleagues won a number of international journalism awards.

Before I started working for the "fifth estate" I was a freelance journalist with the CBC Radio national programs "Sunday Morning" and "Ideas" where I did a documentary series in India and Bolivia.

Currently, I work as a replacement anchor at Newsworld International and as a freelance reporter for "Disclosure": where I have just completed a documentary on the killing of the head of the Canadian mafia.