

## Sahar Gul, new life with new pains

Kawoon Khamosh

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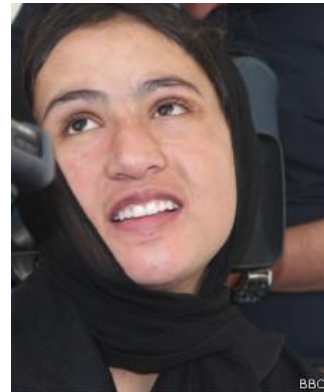
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**Translated by: DANISH Mohd Ali**

Sahar Gul wants the government to not release her husband and his family members.

Sitting in front of a young girl, Sahar plays with her newly rose painted finger nails. A year and half ago, her fingers didn't have nails. They were pulled out by her husband and his family members.

Even now, on being asked about her days in the dark underground of her husband's house and the nights of torture she had to endure, she just focuses on her newly grown nails and without saying anything, fondles them



Her name is Sahar Gul, the girl who was given into marriage at the age of 14 and during her honeymoon was tortured in the dark underground of her husband's house. 6 months later, after the police was informed of her being tortured, action was taken and her life was saved.

By the time she was transferred to a hospital, her husband had already fled. Now months after her treatment, still scars and signs of deep injuries and torture can be clearly seen on her face. Her head is hairless, her skin was cut with a skewer, her body was burned with a spit and her ears were cut.

### **Beginning of the incident**

Sahar Gul was born in a village in the northern province of Baghlan in Afghanistan and grew up there. By the time she was able to know her right and left, her father died. He was proud of his daughter, accompanying her to school everyday.

It's said that after her father died, she lost interest in going to school. Later on, her mother got married for a second time.

According to Sahar Gul, those were days of loneliness, sitting at the corner of the roof, looking at the streets, while her mother had started a new life



Soon, there was a suitor for Sahar Gul. Though she was a young 14 years old girl, Sahar Gul opposed the marriage. Her brother and his wife, living now in Badakhshan, gave her into marriage in exchange of 10000 USD.

“If I try, I learn soon but I do not try. On the exam day, everybody left to study but I left to play with girls and said stories (smile). I didn’t study and all day discussed about our wishes”.

While anger can be seen on her face, Sahar Gul said: “My brother made me marry. He was forced by his wife to give me into marriage”

In the new house, life was bitter and difficult as her in-laws forced her into prostitution. Initially, the police said that the reason for her imprisonment and torture was that she didn’t agree to the family’s demands that she get into prostitution, a claim which was not supported by evidence.

Sahar Gul speaks of the hard days she had endured in the underground of her husband’s house. She was starved and tortured for 6 months, leaving her a shadow of her earlier self.

### **New life with new injuries**

In Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, three women shelters are running to support individuals like Sahar Gul. Currently, Sahar Gul is a resident of one of these shelters. In the shelter where Sahar Gul lives, there are 25 young and adolescent girls who have suffered and fled from family and gender based violence. Each one of them carries a bitter story

When Sahar arrived in the shelter, she recognized that she was not the only person in the world facing such violence, torture and terror. When she got to know about the lives and struggles of the other girls, she forgot her own pains.

Sahar was under treatment for the last one and half years. Her deep wounds were treated in India. She is going to be 16 in a few months. For the first time, she is expecting all her friends at her birthday anniversary.



Currently Sahar is in a shelter in Kabul

She is a student of grade 4 in a school. But as she says, she isn’t interested in studies. Sahar is still a child living her childhood and is happy with the childish games she plays with her friends.

While talking to me, she rarely laughed. She says: "If I try I would learn fast but I don't try. On the day of the exam, everybody leaves to study but I stay, playing and telling stories with girls (with smile). I don't study and instead spend the day talking and sharing stories".

On holidays, she goes to Kabul Zoo and other recreational places in Kabul

Sahar wants to be a women's rights activist. She is now familiar with computer programming and speaks English well. She says that she will slowly be accustomed to study further and prepare for progressive education to become a women's rights activist in the future so that other girls do not have to suffer her fate.

Her nails have grown back and she can wash her clothes herself, but she adds that she doesn't like nail polish. She hates fashion and make-up. Her ears, which were cut, have healed now but she doesn't like to wear earrings and jewelry at all.

But everything is not happy and bright as it seems. She still has nightmares and is afraid that she might again fall into the hands of her husband's family.

10 days ago, the Appeal Court in Kabul convicted her father in law, mother in law and sister in law to one and half years imprisonment. They were initially sentenced to 10 years imprisonment by the trial court on charges of torture, and since they were already in prison for one and half years, they were released.

I asked Sahar on the release of her husband's family members and she said: "Last night after I prayed and went to sleep, I had a nightmare. In the nightmare I saw a dog following me. I cried for help but nobody came. By the time help arrived, I was already eaten by the dog. When I awoke next morning, I was told that my in laws were released".

She says, when heard about their release, the tears were dry in her eyes. Afraid that they might come to her, she closed all windows and now it's been two weeks that she's been living in fear.

Her husband is still under the detection of the police. The Supreme Court in Afghanistan will issue the final verdict/conviction with regard to the torturers of Sahar.

### **I wish I could go to Dubai**

During the last few court hearings Sahar Gul attended and faced her husband's family members. She had hidden herself behind her legal defence and due to fear, she couldn't talk on the issue.

More than her husband, she is scared of her mother in law, father in law and sister in law and asks the Afghan Government not to release them.

She says: "I am not afraid if they are in prison, but if released, they can go wherever they want and they would know where I am staying. I am concerned that when I go out, they will come and abduct me and I wouldn't be able to do anything".

Sahar wants the government to imprison her husband's family for at least 10 years. She believes that in 10 years time, she would be old and independent enough to defend herself against anyone who would want to violate her rights.

Sahar Gul has only one brother. He had given Sahar away in marriage and is now regretful of what he did. But for Sahar, what's most important is that she achieves her dreams.

She has seen pictures of Dubai and her dearest wish is to go to Dubai, the illuminated and beautiful city, where she could laugh loudly.

Women's rights activists say that Sahar Gul is an example and a beacon of hope for thousands of Afghan girls who have been tortured and silenced.

Shokria Khaliqi, a women rights activist says, "If the Afghan Supreme Court releases the torturers of Sahar Gul, Afghan women and girls won't dare to stand up against the patriarchal family system anymore."



Recently the Afghanistan Parliament placed the Elimination of Violence against Women Law (EVAW Law) at their agenda of discussion. The opposition of some members of parliament resulted in the ambiguity of the law, which protects the rights and freedom of women

In Afghanistan, the Ulema (religious figures) believe that women should be given freedom according to the Islamic rules not freedom and right that they demand.