

## **Afghan Women Speak Out Against Violence**

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Event told that gender discrimination comes in many forms.

A recent IWPR debate in the northern Afghanistan province of Samangan heard that institutional corruption, unemployment and poverty were all factors fuelling rising rates of abuse against women.

An audience of some 100 women and girls also heard speakers argue that gender discrimination had to be battled in all its forms, not just physical violence.

“Violence against women has increased year by year... this is a cause for concern,” said Sibghatullah, a lecturer in the law faculty of Samangan university.

Shekiba Mohammadzai, a leading local businesswoman, said that poverty was one of the underlying factors.

She said she was trying to create job opportunities for women, judging that if their financial situation improved then domestic violence would diminish.

“For instance, we have done work with women in the area of the handicrafts industry, with good results,” she continued.

The meeting also discussed how a lack of access to education was holding women back.

“Women cannot attend school, women cannot attend university,” said debate participant Lailuma. “I participated in an event in this province where the deputy head of education of Samangan said that until a separate university was built for girls, they should not study. This is evidence of violence against women.”

Women’s rights activist Zia Gul Nasri noted that gender discrimination, along with corruption, was rife in local government.

Most Samangan institutions were dominated by men, she said, with few jobs available for women.

“There are no employment opportunities for women in these organisations, and when educated women apply for work there, they are not given the job,” she said, adding, “The department of women’s affairs and the officials of this province actually have no interest for women to work in state institutions.”

Officials rejected such claims, arguing that there were simply very few female applicants for jobs in local government.

“If the women themselves do not struggle, they will not be given their rights,” said Fathullah, head of Samangan’s department of information and culture.

However, debate participant Ferishta told Fathullah that she had repeatedly applied for government jobs with no success.

“I myself have visited government institutions several times, but I was not given a job and this is another form violence against women,” she said.

Khadeeja Hasani, head of the department of women’s affairs, said that the negligible representation of women in local government was due to the male-dominated nature of society throughout Afghanistan, and not just a problem in Samangan.

Hasani also praised the role of the media in raising awareness about human rights, which she said had led to more women coming forward to lodge complaints.

“More than 200 cases of violence were recorded this year in the province, which shows a significant increase comparing with past years,” Hasani said.

These figures actually reflected an increasing awareness among women of their rights, she argued, with survivors of domestic abuse proactively seeking to document the crimes against them.

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