

Afghan Women Still Sidelined

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Event hears how male family members are the ones empowered to make decisions.

Women are still being denied the right to make basic choices about their own lives, according to speakers at an IWPR-organised debate in the southeastern province of Paktia.

Low levels of education and conservative traditions meant that men and women alike were unaware of their fundamental rights. Many participants told the debate that they had been completely sidelined from decision-making within the family, including basic choices about their own future or that of their loved ones.

Guldana, an elderly audience member, said that her husband had never consulted her on any decision in the 50 years of their marriage.

"When my husband was arranging my daughter's marriage, he did not even ask me about this major issue, because my husband is uneducated and does not know what rights his wife, daughter, and other children have," she continued.

Another woman, Zakia, said that she had been told women had no right to study or to even leave the house. Her own family had refused to let her stay on at school after the seventh grade.

"There are many girls like me who are not even allowed to study, while consulting them [over decisions concerning their own lives] is out of the question," she concluded.

Debate participant Palwasha said that women needed to be better educated if they were to fight gender inequality.

"I have been married, but I don't know what my rights are nor what my husband's rights are," she continued. "If I don't understand this, how could I know anything about other people's rights? Who would consult me on family issues while this is the extent of my knowledge?"

Civil society activist Muzdalifa Mangal said that her own family had also never included her in decision-making.

The government, she continued, had utterly failed to change attitudes. Muzdalifa called for state-run education programmes and for religious scholars to tell their congregants that Islam also respected women's rights.

Nasrin Oriakhel, the provincial director of women's affairs, acknowledged that women were still excluded from family decisions, especially in more remote areas, but argued that the situation was now much improved.

Her department had already organised some public awareness programmes, Oriakhel continued.

Attitudes have been slow to change, however. Debate participant Mohammadullah, from Paktia's Sayed Karam district, said, "There is a famous adage in our society that those who listen to their wives do not have good lives."

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