

Afghan Youth Debates: Low Female Turnout Predicted in Helmand

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Only five out of 15 districts in Afghanistan's volatile Helmand province will have polling stations that women can access on election day, an IWPR debate has heard.

Shafiqullah Safi, regional spokesman for the Independent Election Commission (IEC), said officials had made the decision based on the number of registration cards obtained by female voters wanting to take part in the ballot.

Helmand, a conservative region in the south of the country, has witnessed some of the fiercest fighting between NATO-led troops and the Taliban since the United States-led invasion in 2001.

Women in the province are not expected to vote in large numbers because of cultural constraints, and those who do will have to use separate, female-only centres in order to conform to local sensitivities.

"We will open as many voting centres for men as women in the Lashkar Gah, Nawa-i Barakzai, Gereshk, Nad Ali and Marjah districts," Safi told students. "We made this decision based on the number of women who have obtained voting cards in these districts."

Helmand, which encompasses more than 1,000 villages in one of the largest of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, continues to suffer from widespread violence at the hands of the Taliban.

More than 400 British soldiers have been killed as a result of enemy action since the start of the campaign in 2006, with the vast majority of deaths occurring in Helmand. Now commanders are now increasingly concerned by the high number of casualties suffered by the Afghan army and police who are due to take over at the end of this year.

The latest in a series of IWPR debates across Afghanistan was held at Helmand University in the provincial centre Lashkar Gah on February 11.

The panellists included Abdullah Khaliqi, a spokesman for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), Mohammad Qasem Adel, a lecturer at the university, and Ajmal Khan Dawar, head of the provincial department for youth affairs.

Safi told the debate that the IEC had only launched public awareness initiatives aimed at encouraging greater voter participation in the April 5 election in two districts – Gereshk and Nad Ali.

"In other districts, women have not been able to attend these programmes due to poor security and cultural barriers," he said, adding that women were prevented from attending by male members of their family.

Mirwais, a university student in Helmand, asked the panel whether it was worth women voting given the obstacles they faced.

Khaliqi replied, "Yes, women should vote. The votes of men and women carry equal weight." He added that the government had to "provide greater public awareness for men to convince them of the value of elections".

"We have to educate men that it is just as important for women to vote," he said.

Abdul Wali Paizhand is a university student in Helmand and an IWPR trainee.

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