

## **Afghan Youth Debates: Praise for Female Voters' Bravery**

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A senior university lecturer from the southeastern province of Paktia has praised the uncompromising bravery of Afghan women who took part in the recent elections.

Nazdana Paktiawal, a teacher attached to the medical faculty at Paktia University, said the unusually high turnout among female voters on April 5 was directly attributable to the work done by the media and civil society groups.

Speaking to a packed IWPR debate held on April 30, Paktiawal argued that women now had a far stronger understanding of the significance of elections, and of why they owed it to themselves to participate.

She urged all female voters to play a bigger role in political life.

"Women now understand that they have to play a more active role in society in order to defend their rights," she told students. "The more prominent a role they take in elections, the more able they'll be to demonstrate their power."

This debate, one in a series held by IWPR across Afghanistan, was a joint event that linked up university students in the Kunduz and Paktia provinces via video. Kunduz is in the far north of the country and Paktia is in the southeast on the border with Pakistan.

While some of the panellists were quick to highlight the successes of the April 5 ballot, others warned against complacency.

Marzia Rustami, a civil society activist from Kunduz, told the event that good security, combined with increased public awareness programmes and the backing of some Muslim clerics, helped increase the female vote to an unprecedented level.

She said 36 per cent of the 200,000 people who voted in Kunduz were women.

"Women have realised that just like men, they have their place in Islam and are not worthless creatures," she told the audience. "Voters showed that they wanted change and that they were somehow tired of the past."

Rustami noted that the number of women voting varied enormously between larger towns and more rural areas. In the latter, she said, "women still obey decisions made by their husbands and are still restricted by custom and tradition. Their level of awareness is far lower."

Niazullah Asil Zazai, a journalist in Paktia, said he regarded the media's role in the election as the biggest contributing factor to the high turnout.

"It was the media that went into people's houses and informed each of them, particularly women, about the importance of their vote," he argued. "Broadcasting radio programmes about the elections played a significant role in raising public awareness."

Mohammad Hassan Kolabi, a student at Kunduz University, asked the panel how women in Paktia had been able to vote given the particularly conservative environment in that province, as well as the considerable insurgent activity there.

To this Zazai replied, "After the collapse of the Taleban regime and the establishment of an open media, as well as civil society institutions that defend women's rights, our situation has changed. These institutions have played an important role in informing women."

**Mohammad Isa Aria is a student at Kunduz University and an IWPR trainee.**

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**Location:** [Afghanistan](#)

**Topic:** [Elections](#)

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