

Female Journalists Abandon Afghan Province

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Fear of an insurgent takeover has driven women away from local media.

Half of the 80 female journalists who once worked in the northern Afghan city of Kunduz have fled since a Taliban offensive three years ago.

During fighting in the northern province in 2015, the insurgents even seized control of the provincial capital for 15 days. Having maintained control over a number of districts ever since, locals say it is hard to be sure that the city might not fall again.

The consequent effective on freedom of speech has been chilling, especially when it comes to female voices in the media. Although the province's nine radio outlets and three TV stations are still operational, they now only employ around 40 women. The output has also changed, with less focus on programmes dealing with gender rights and equality.

Enayatullah Khaliq, head of the association of NGOs in the Afghan northeast, said that the lack of female voices in the media had a profound effect on social attitudes.

"It's been three years since women had an outlet on the radio, due to fear of Taliban, and this will have a negative impact on the lives of women in Kunduz," he said.

Before September 2015, three radio stations - Kaihan, Cheragh and Zohra - were even run by women.

Rafiullah Hedayat, former executive officer of Afghanistan National Radio and TV (RTA) in Kunduz, confirmed that although women were still license holders, the three stations were all now headed by men.

Hedayat told IWPR that Najia Khudayar, Zohra, the ex-director of radio outlet, currently lived in Germany. Zarghona Hassan, who ran the Kaihan radio outlet, moved to Finland and Malali Yousufi, former director of Cheragh radio, was in India.

Local women agree that there is now a gap in the province's radio coverage. Shameela Sahibzada said that before the 2015 capture of Kunduz she regularly listened to Radio Kaihan's educational programmes.

The 27-year-old said that she had also been an active participant in the radio's live call-in shows and panel discussions and would often call the station to share ideas and ask questions.

These days, she continued, she rarely followed the programmes as they were produced by men and had little content that was relevant to her. Her parents also disapproved of her contacting radio shows moderated by men.

"My father tells me that he does not like me to talk to a man through my mobile phone because my voice is heard by all the public and this would bring disgrace on our family," she said.

Nasiba Holkar is now the provincial director of women's affairs but worked as a defence lawyer in Kunduz between 2011 and 2014.

She also said that during that time she spent many hours as a participant in the programmes for women broadcast by Zohra, Kaihan and Cheragh radios.

For ten years the three stations had all played a significant role in educating women about vital social and legal issues, Holkar continued.

Now the three radio outlets were run by men, she was rarely invited to appear on these programmes, even though she was the provincial director of women's affairs.

"The male employees of Radio Cheragh, Kaihan, and Zohra do not invite me as often as the female journalists used to before the fall of Kunduz province," she concluded.

Local media specialist Zabihullah Majidi said that it was indefensible that women were now in effect excluded from the media.

"Without doubt, gender bias and exclusivity in the media are powerful tools of repression and restrict freedom that go against the common good," he concluded.

Nimatullah Temori, spokesman for the Kunduz provincial government, agreed that the loss of female

voices from the local media scene was amongst the worst consequences of the Taleban assault.

He argued that Kunduz was now much safer and called for female journalists to return and continue their vital work.

But for some, it is just not worth the risk. Parvin Hamidi used to be the producer of Kaihan Radio's Woman and Life programme, working along 14 other female colleagues.

Now living in Kabul, she told IWPR that her job in Kunduz had been the fulfilment of a lifelong dream.

"With the fall of Kunduz, I lost my city as well as my passion and profession," Hamidi said.

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