No School Today

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Girls in Kandahar are being denied an education because of tradition and security concerns. Wazhma is in the seventh grade at Zarghona Ana High School in Kandahar. This makes her an exception in this conservative southern province and Taliban stronghold, where, according to some estimates, less than one girl in ten receives even a primary education.

“There are 60 or 70 houses in my neighbourhood,” said the solemn 16-year-old. “But there is only one other girl who goes to school. Many of my friends want to go but their fathers won’t let them. Our neighbours make fun of us, of my family, and say that we are not good people because I’m going to school. I don’t listen to them.”

According to the Afghan constitution, education is a universal right and obligation. Parents are required to send both boys and girls to school up to the 12th grade. But in practice the law is almost universally flouted, and the government appears powerless to do anything about it.

“Yes, it is true that the constitution guarantees the right to education,” said Hayatullah Rafiqi, head of the department of education for Kandahar province. “But we cannot send soldiers to people’s houses to demand that fathers send their daughters to school. If we tried, nobody would send their children to school, because the government would be pushing them. It would be counterproductive.”

Under the Taliban, girls were banned from education, and girls’ schools were closed. Since the regime’s demise more than four years ago, the government has put money and effort into getting girls back into the classroom. Indeed, female school attendance is hailed as one of the new administration’s major accomplishments.

Rafiqi insists that Kandahar is doing well in this regard: According to his figures, 70 per cent of school-age girls in the provincial capital are attending school. Across the province, Rafiqi said 40 per cent are doing so.

“A lot more people are ready to let their daughters go to school than in the period before the Taliban,” said Rafiqi. “The department of education has programmes on television promoting female education, to convince parents that school is not a bad place. We have a lot of refugees returning from Pakistan and Iran – they saw educated women there, and are ready to let their daughters study.”

But his numbers just do not add up, insist education workers.

“The government gives these numbers to show their success,” said Rangina Hamidi, head of Afghans for Civil Society, a non-government organisation. “But it is just not true.”

Hamidi estimates that no more than ten per cent of girls in the provincial capital are in school, and that the numbers are far lower in rural areas.

Even Rafiqi acknowledges that only 24,000 of the 130,000 students in Kandahar’s schools are girls. There
are only 12 girls’ schools in the entire province, compared with 328 for boys.

Abdul Wahed is principal of the Zarghona Ana school. He has 1,600 students and 60 teachers, three them men. Zarghona Ana is one of only four high schools in Kandahar that educates girls, and it caters for the daughters of government employees and businessmen.

“We are running out of room - we have some of our classes in tents,” said Wahed. “But we do not reject anyone. We provide transport for girls who live far away from the school. People are worried about security but we still are getting more and more girls every day.”

But the pull of tradition is strong in Kandahar, the area where the Taleban movement first took off, still a bastion of conservative Pashtun tradition.

Mahmad Omar, 35, has a small business selling gas. He has seven children - three boys and four girls. One son works with him, the other two are in school. But all his daughters are at home.

“School is not for girls,” he said. “I don’t let them go. Girls should be at home. If they go to school, people will see them on the street, and that would be very shameful for me.”

Omar is convinced that education runs contrary to Islamic tradition, “After they go to school, girls think that they can go anywhere, that they do not have to wear the hijab [head covering], and that they don’t have to hide their faces. Islam does not accept that.”

Asefa, 18, is one of the lucky few that are in school. But she has to run the gauntlet of condemning looks every day.

“Men in the street laugh at me, and call me names,” she said. “They say, ‘Why are you going to school? You’re a girl and you don’t need this.’ But I begged my family for months to let me go, and they finally did.”

Many of her friends have dropped out of school, unable to face the stares and the jeers, she said.

Even those who are theoretically in favour of female education are nervous about the security situation. Kandahar is unstable and, some say, getting worse, with a rise in suicide bombings and armed clashes between insurgents and the security forces. The Taleban may be gaining ground thanks to a rising tide of discontent with the foreign troop presence.

“I like school,” said Amanullah, 52. “I have five children, two girls and three boys. The boys are going to school, but the girls are not.

“I’m uncertain about their security - I can’t allow something to happen to them in the streets or in school. I know that educated people are good and I want to educate my children, but not now. My daughters beg me every day to let them go to school. I say, ‘If the situation improves, I promise I will let you go.’”
That promise may not be realised soon. In the past year, 150 schools have closed throughout the province, said an education worker with a local non-government agency who asked not to be identified. One school principal has been killed and teachers have been threatened. In several districts “night letters” - covertly distributed pamphlets - have been distributed warning parents not to send their daughters to school and threatening violence to those who do not heed the warning. At least seven schools have been set on fire.

In one district, Maruf, all the schools have been closed for the last nine months following a campaign of intimidation. In others, such as Dand, Maiwand, and Panjuai, they are open only intermittently, depending on the security situation.

Much of the strife is attributed to the Taleban. But, maintains Hamidi, the anti-education tradition predates the fundamentalist group.

“When my family were refugees in Quetta [Pakistan] 20 years ago, we received the same kind of warnings,” said Hamidi, who grew up and was educated in the United States. “My father had to take us out of school. There was no Taleban then.”

The only solution is for the government to get more serious about education, say observers. A concerted effort by officials, education professionals, and religious scholars is needed if female education in Kandahar is to make any headway. But these same observers say the government does not have the resolve to go against tradition and prejudice.

“The government does not care about education,” said one worker with a non-governmental agency who declined to be identified. “They could open the schools if they wanted to.”

Wahidullah Amani is an IWPR staff reporter in Kabul.

**Location:** Pakistan
- Iraqi Kurdistan
- Iran

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