

## **Pakistani Students Commend Rights Training**

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Students attending IWPR classroom discussions say they've acquired a better understanding of rights issues.

Students and teachers in Pakistan's troubled North West Frontier Province have said that IWPR's school-based journalism training programme has helped raise awareness of civil rights and the rule of law.

The comments came in an October feedback survey by one of the programme's partner NGOs, the Islamabad-based Peace Education And Development Foundation, PEAD, which canvassed opinion in 11 participating schools in the region.

Five of the schools were madrassas in the regional capital Peshawar; the others state schools in rural Charsadda district, to the north of Peshawar.

PEAD asked all participating students - around 100-150 in each school - and the two coordinating teachers appointed to facilitate the project to fill in a simple feedback form about their experiences so far.

Most of the students took part in Open Minds discussion sessions on civil rights and the rule of law, which PEAD helps to facilitate. Some also attended Open Minds journalism training classes organised by professional journalists.

Asked to comment on the projects, 70 per cent said they thought they were very good and about the same proportion of those who attended the discussion forums said they had significantly improved their understanding of rights issues.

Project training sessions are largely oral, with little writing involved. But those who have difficulty in writing are helped by fellow students, and the project's peer educators, when the sessions require it.

Students' responses to the discussion classes showed that they are keen to learn more and make use of what they learned.

Rehana Hussain, from the Government Girls' Higher Secondary School Sherpao, in Charsadda, wrote that "the project has taught us that we must not be passive observers or spectators to various events, and that we should stand up for our legitimate rights. The project has ... taught us how to play our role in shaping and moulding a peaceful society".

Sajjad Mubarak from the same school, said, "In the [Open Minds] programme, regular lectures are delivered to us that include women rights, child rights, rights of minorities and rule of law etc. I like all these topics especially lectures about women rights and children rights - because we all know that women and children are the victims of discrimination and exploitation in society and cannot raise their voice.

"Schoolchildren are compelled to do labour in our society and it is a source of shame and contempt for the Pashtuns. Thanks God, we are being sensitised on all these critical issues and we doing our best to inform our immediate neighbours about all these rights."

Another student from the school, Rehan Mehk, wrote, "As a result of this project I came to know what broadmindedness is. Now I am capable of differentiating between right and wrong. I know the rights and duties of other individuals and myself as well. I can express my views and opinions in front of others. Due to this project, I am capable of taking stand on an issue with sound arguments and can take decisions on my own and not to follow others blindly."

PEAD found that in the first discussions sessions, students were asking very basic and simple questions, for

instance about the meaning of the constitution and the rights of women in society.

By the time of the feedback survey – after 5 months of training – they were posing much more complicated questions.

For example, one student asked, “If minorities have rights in Islam and the constitution, then why are they living in a miserable condition in Pakistan?” Another quizzed PEAD staff about whether it was a breach of law for the Pakistani security forces to kill Pakistani citizens besieging Islamabad’s Red Mosque in 2007.

The teachers in girls’ schools particularly appreciate the chance that the project is giving their students. Rifat Latif, an Open Minds coordinating teacher, wrote in her feedback to PEAD that “students are the backbone of every nation and therefore, there is a need to start such projects throughout the country”.

The head teacher of Madrassa Hadikat ul Quran, a boys-only institution in Peshawar, said. “The project ... is no less than a movement for the well being of the young generation. [PEAD] has a new approach and vision towards solving complex issues in society.”

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