

Parallel Schools for Girls in Southeast Afghan Province

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Thousands attend unregistered madrassas where the government has no control.

Maryam, 15, regularly attends a school, but not one that is recognised by the Afghan government.

“I study in a girls’ madrassa [religious school],” the Khost teenager told IWPR. “My father said I should study in a madrassa because the [state] school is not a good place. You forget your traditions there and your religious observance is harmed.”

Her friend Zuhra, 13, is in a similar position.

“Our family elders say it’s better to study in the village madrassas than to study in the modern schools, because the insurgents and other villagers don’t see them as a bad thing.”

Modern education has long been viewed with suspicion in Khost, a conservative province in the southeast of Afghanistan. Islamic law stresses the importance of education for women as well as men. But many local people believe that girls who are educated will abandon their faith. Others fear Taleban reprisals, or worry about letting their daughters travel long distances to school.

Thousands of girls are now part of a parallel education system, following a curriculum based on Saudi and Pakistani models that applies a stricter interpretation of Islam than state-run madrassas and ordinary schools. For instance, male teachers in state schools engage face-to-face with female pupils, whereas in the madrassas they conduct lectures using a microphone from behind a curtain.

The provincial education department says there are more than 300,000 children at 435 schools in Khost. Girls make up around a third of that number.

Bakhtnur Bakhtyar, the head of Khost’s education department, says there are also 27 state-registered madrassas for girls in the province, catering for around 1,400 students.

Bakhtyar says a further 3,000 girls attend 160 unregistered madrassas.

Teachers in the parallel system put the number higher than that. Maulavi Mohammad Naim, head teacher at the Jamia Aisha al-Siddiqa lil-Banat Madrassa in Khost’s Matun district, says there are more than 200 unregistered all-female madrassas with more than 6,000 pupils across the province.

MADRASSAS “IN KEEPING WITH TRADITION”

Khost resident Haji Zahir said he had sent five girls from his family to study at a madrassa instead of at government schools. The reason, he said, was that the curriculum and environment was in keeping with Islamic law and local tradition.

“By sending my girls to a madrassa, I avoided people badmouthing our family, and I also avoided a situation where the girls would be taught by men. That’s what happens in government schools and it isn’t appropriate,” Zahir said. “However, boys from our family do study in the modern government schools, because we trust them more than we do the girls not to stray from the path of religion.”

Inzirgul, a resident of the Matun district, said that women who had attended government schools in the 1980s, when state education was modelled on Soviet practice, were unduly influenced by its values.

“I don’t send my girls to a modern school because they would lose their religious values there,” he told IWPR. “If we now allow our girls to attend modern schools, they will become westernised.”

Maulavi Mohammad Naim said his madrassa in Matun was set up ten years ago, and had grown from 100 to more than 1,000 female pupils, with 18 teachers.

Naim said that devised his school's curriculum to combine the educational guidelines of the Afghan government with those of well-known madrassas in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. His programme had been adopted by many other madrassas in Afghanistan, he added.

Girls paid a monthly fee equivalent to between six and 13 US dollars. Extra funds raised from local businessmen to cover food and transport, and donations also came from Arab countries.

Alhaj Matiullah Fazili, the deputy head of Khost's provincial education department, expressed reservations about the syllabus taught at unofficial madrassas, which he said was at odds with the education ministry curriculum.

Currently, he said, the education department was not pressuring these madrassas to register with the authorities. Embarking on such a policy could put at risk the education of thousands of girls, as insurgent leaders had put pressure on madrassas to remain independent of the state.

NEED FOR OVERSIGHT

Experts say unofficial madrassas cannot be allowed to operate without any kind of supervision.

"These madrassas need to be registered," said political analyst Faruq Jan Mangal. "Although they are not an immediate threat, they could become one in the long run. Most of the teachers in these madrassas [in Khost] come from madrassas beyond the Durand Line [border with in Pakistan], which used to maintain good standards but have since turned into sources of terror."

Mangal added, "The provincial departments for Hajj and religious affairs and for education, as well as the council of [Islamic] scholars, must ensure that the Afghan educational curriculum is taught in those madrassas and monitor them, so that Afghan culture and history are also taught to the students. If they learn about their country and history, they won't become a threat to the national security of Afghanistan."

Naim said he and other head teachers would be happy to register their madrassas if officials helped them with the process.

Khost's deputy education head Fazili said registration came with numerous benefits.

"If they register these madrassas with us, we provide salaries for the teachers, free education for the students, premises, books and stationary," he said. "In the future, we will try to arrange food and transportation for them, as well."

Fazili said unregistered madrassas generally resisted coming under the auspices of the provincial education department.

"One reason the teachers don't want these madrassas to be registered is that most of them come from Pakistani madrassas and don't have the relevant Afghan educational qualifications, for instance a baccalaureate or a bachelor's degree," he said. "That makes them ineligible to teach. They would lose their jobs if these madrassas were registered.

"But if they are not registered, they could become a threat to the Afghan government."

Khost provincial council head Amirullah Zraswand agreed the situation was delicate. Some of madrassas had been registered, but this was not seen as a priority.

"The Khost provincial council has held meetings with the education department about girls' madrassas and ways of making them official," he said. "However, there are many bigger problems within the education department that overshadow this issue."

Mubarez Mohammad Zadran, spokesman for the governor of Khost, agreed that there were concerns that religious schools could promote an extremist agenda. He said that in time, all of them would be brought into the national system.

“The Khost governor has presented the education department with a clear framework for madrassas under which all of them – for both girls and boys –will be registered, and the government will provide them with the same facilities as state schools,” Zadran said.

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