

## **Schools Focus of Conflict in Afghan Province**

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Debate hears of “staggering” amount of damage caused to the system.

Children are being denied access to education in the central Afghanistan province of Maidan Wardak by a combination of conflict, poverty and conservative tradition, according to speakers at an IWPR event in the provincial capital Maidan Shahr.

Around 100 local people had the chance to question education officials and activists at the debate, held at Tabish private university on December 31.

“Schools have become the focus of conflict in Maidan Wardak province and this has caused a staggering amount of damage to the education system,” said provincial council deputy head, Sharifullah Hotak, adding, “The department of education is making all possible efforts to keep the schools active and open, but because of fighting and the lack of security, many girls don’t want to go to school.

Children were at risk of being caught in crossfire, he continued.

“When a girl leaves her home to go to school, there are no guarantees that she will arrive safely and not be shot by either the Taleban or the security forces,” he said, adding, “If the government doesn’t build security checkpoints near schools, the insurgents will not set up ambushes at schools. Every day the insurgents lay in wait near schools.”

The director of Maidan Wardak’s education department, Fazal-ul-Rahman Tariq, acknowledged that progress had been limited.

“Over the last 15 years, our department was not able to open a high school for girls in many areas of Maidan Wardak,” he said. “There isn’t a single girls’ high school in three out of the nine districts in Maidan Wardak, although other districts have one or two girls’ high schools.”

Tariq said that there were a total of 481 schools in the province. Nearly 17,000 students were enrolled, including just over 5,000 girls. He added that there were around 5,000 teachers, although only some 300 of these were female.

Maidan Wardak, 30 kilometers west of Kabul, has a population of around 900,000.

Some debate participants criticized the provincial education department for failing to reach out to people in more remote districts.

University student Rafeullah Arman said, “It’s the responsibility of the education department to meet people in those areas where people don’t have access to education.”

Tariq replied that the local community in turn needed to engage with officials in order to increase educational provision in their area.

“Our policies mean that we are not allowed to simply build a school by ourselves, but if somebody approaches us we are ready to fully cooperate and provide all the facilities that we have available,” he said. “It is the moral and ethical responsibility of people to support and help their government, so that we can add primary schools to secondary schools and high schools in the region. We have our procedures and if people apply to the department of education, I can assure you that their voice will be heard. We have accepted the requests of all those people who have asked us to build schools.”

Mirwais Hashimi, the chancellor of Tabish private university, also argued that local people needed to take action.

“We cannot just hold the department of education responsible for all the current problems in the education system,” he said, adding that poverty, a lack of security and conservative social traditions also had an impact.

“We should not ignore these truths. It’s not only the department of education that is to blame. There are many other factors which have restricted people’s access to education.”

He noted that girls in particular were excluded from even basic educational facilities in many areas of Maidan Wardak province. Where schools existed and girls were able to graduate from high school, security, economic and cultural obstacles meant they did not go on to take university entrance exams.

Human rights activist Qudratullah Zwak said that girls were expected to get married as soon as they left school and that this was the major obstacle for them continuing in education. There were also concerns surrounding studying in mixed groups with members of the opposite sex.

Another issue was the difficulties students faced in parts of the province under insurgent rule.

“In areas controlled by the Taleban, students are not allowed to study government textbooks,” Hotak said. “The Taleban have ordered school officials to implement the curriculum according to their own suggestions.”

This went beyond excluding girls from education, he continued.

“The Taleban also interfere in the affairs of boys’ schools and don’t permit the teachers to teach modern or social subjects.”

Rahman disputed this, adding, “The Taleban don’t have a special school curriculum. They have ordered that a subject called Islamic Teaching must be taught at schools, but the governmental curriculum is more advanced, modern and improved.”

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