

Women Relish Literacy Drive

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Illiterate, middle-aged women are flocking to government-sponsored basic education classes.

After 40 years, Shahgul no longer gets on the wrong bus - because she can read their destinations. She walks more confidently past the rows of shops - because she can tell what goods they are selling from their signs.

Best of all, she says, "I can now write my children's names."

Until a few months ago, Shahgul was illiterate, like millions of other Afghan women. The country's literacy rate is only about 30 per cent, and even lower in many rural areas.

Both of Shahgul's sons, Zarif and Sharif, have graduated from high school, but they can't find decent jobs and have to sell fruit to earn a living. Still, Shahgul believes in the value of education - because she went so long without it.

Shahgul took primary school classes at her workplace, the Agriculture Development Bank, where she is a guard. Illiterate government employees in Kabul are required to take the classes, and additional ones are available in some districts outside the city.

About 5,300 women have taken the education ministry's classes over the past 12 months, and 5,600 are enrolled this year.

The nine-month long course covers grades one through to three. The curriculum is specially prepared for older pupils, and the instructors are particularly patient, because formal study is completely novel for so many of the women. But what the new students lack in classroom experience, they make up for in motivation.

Parwin, 57, who is in the first grade of the literacy training, says she is the sole support for her eight grandchildren and two daughters-in-law, since her husband is dead and her two sons were killed in the civil war. After she finishes work as a cleaner with the Agriculture Development Bank, she attends classes, then goes home to help with the housework. In her spare time, she studies her lessons with her nephew Ajmal, who is in seventh grade.

Even though it adds to her already heavy pile of duties, going back to school is a pleasure because she has wanted to be literate for so long, she said.

Although women who graduate from the programme can go on to vocational schools, many of them aren't aiming for career advancement.

Naseema, who at the age of 40 is in school for the first time, told IWPR that women were once happy just to have jewelry but now wanted skills. She said that because of their age, they were unlikely to become scientists but could at least learn how to communicate better.

That simple ability allowed Guljan, 38, to speak freely to her husband for the first time. He is an educated man who worked for many years in the education ministry, and is a neighborhood leader in Kabul.

“In the past I would feel embarrassed when talking to my husband, because I’d make mistakes in pronunciation of words and he would make fun of me,” she said. But now that she’s taken classes at the ministry of water and power, where she works as a cook, she speaks “without any fear”. Her husband is also happy that he can communicate better with her, Guljan said.

She’s even able to help their children, ages 7 and 9, learn the alphabet. The children missed their first years of school because the family fled Kabul during the Taleban regime and lived in tents outside Jalalabad.

But many other women still don’t have an opportunity. The literacy classes have only addressed a small part of the demand.

Most women end their education when they marry - which is often before they complete high school. And under the Taleban regime, females were forbidden to attend school.

Although conservatives in many areas still oppose education for girls, most ordinary Afghan men support this right, particularly for their wives and daughters.

“The successive wars in Afghanistan deprived all girls and women of the wealth of education,” said Mohammad Anwar, whose wife Shazia is eagerly waiting to go to school for the first time in her life. “Many older women have bad lives because of illiteracy.”

Shazia’s mother, Mahjan, confirms the need, “I spent 60 years in ignorance. Illiteracy is the one cause for the backwardness of our society.” She too wants to go back to school. Mahjan says she can’t even count money, as she is unable to read bill denominations.

For this year, the education ministry plans to add 58 courses in Kabul workplaces and regions around the city, said Najia Zarah, literacy director. But in most of the villages and other parts of Afghanistan, women have no such opportunity.

Other organisations have smaller programmes, some incorporating courses in reading and writing into vocational training.

Literacy is an essential step to making women active participants in a democracy, from knowing their own rights to participating in elections, said Palwasha Hassan, coordinator and consultant for the Afghan Women’s Rights Fund.

Minister of Education Younis Qanooni said this week that literacy programme for older women was slow in getting started, but the ministry plans to rapidly expand it, and offer classes in all the provinces by the end of the year.

But not all women are enthusiastic about the schooling opportunities. Alif Nisa, a cleaner at the agriculture ministry, said that, at 45, she’s too old to sit in a classroom and finds it tedious. To her, the only plus side is that she gets time off from work.

She regrets, however, that her four children also are illiterate, because “we are like blind people who can’t see their way”.

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Location: Afghanistan

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