

Afghan Women: Accomplishments and the Road Ahead
Noorjahan Akbar

Noorjahan Akbar is a senior at Dickinson College originally from Afghanistan. She discussed her work in support of women's rights in Afghanistan.

She showed the group pictures of family and friends including her participation in demonstrations to increase awareness of women's issues in Kabul. She also showed the group pictures of the women she admires as role models in Afghanistan. These included the first female mayor in Afghanistan as well as a woman who succeeded in clearing her name of adultery accusations through the legal system.

Noorjahan focused throughout her presentation on the positive accomplishments of women in Afghanistan rather than the negative experiences that often garner the national media in the United States and create negative stereotypes. Rather than defining women in the country by these negative stereotypes, she wants to give a voice and expression to those women who have struggled and successfully balanced education, career, and family life.

Other accomplishments she mentioned were the inclusion of female pilots in the Afghan Air Force as well as the founding of female sports organizations, which includes Afghanistan's first female Olympian. There has also been a dramatic decrease in maternal mortality due partly to the development of midwife education programs and also encouraging girls to stay in school past eighth grade. Much of the maternal mortality is due to pregnancies that occur between age 14 and age 18.

Noorjahan spoke about the challenges that still remain including increasing political support for women's rights in the religious Ulema Council. She also stressed on-going advocacy at the international level as well as more grassroots advocacy.

As part of the advocacy movement, she urged Americans to keep women's issues in Afghanistan on the table. She said that many people are working to reduce the probability of having no US military troops in the country since having a small US contingent may increase the probability of stability and a smoother transition.

To end the program she quoted a short poem in both Farsi and English – "I am not that weak a willow to tremble with any wind." Her message was to keep positive and to applaud the successes of women in all the various ways they have moved forward in the past few years.

She expressed her desire to continue her studies in sociology at the graduate level to obtain a graduate degree after she completes her undergraduate degree from Dickinson so she can continue her research here and her work in Afghanistan.

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