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From southern Afghanistan's voiceless women come 1,000 prayers for peace

At extraordinary meetings Wednesday, southern Afghan women prayed and told stories about how the war has torn their families apart.

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New Delhi

In the heart of southern Afghanistan, hundreds of women gathered Wednesday to do something extraordinary: They raised their voices in prayers for peace.

The idea of women doing anything aside from tending to home and family is fairly shocking in provinces like Kandahar and Helmand, where the ultra-fundamentalist Taliban control most of the countryside. Yet the assembling of an estimated 1,000 women in six southern provinces is a compelling development, women's rights experts say.

In this region, working through the conventions of Islam is perhaps the only acceptable avenue for women to make themselves heard. At the meetings, the women recited the Koran and shared stories of how the war has torn their families apart.

In doing so, they got a taste of what it means to at least participate, if not to lead, in a broader world. People in these areas "are used to seeing women in the four walls of their houses," says Massouda Jala, former head of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul, who was reached by telephone. "This is all they know."

Giving women a taste of a broader life is the only way to begin to empower them, she says: "If the women leaders are sitting at home, it will not happen."

Other parts of the country have made important strides toward greater rights for women in recent years. Women are members of parliament, and in some large cities – such as Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Herat – many women choose not to wear the burqa. In the south, however, bare faces are almost unheard-of, and the notion of a woman working remains the fantastic invention of heretical foreigners.

"For the traditional society, it is something new to see women active," says Dr. Jalal. "They need to get used to it and have their mentality changed."

The moment represents an important time – set between a more traditional past and an uncertain future. "We Afghan women should take this opportunity," says Jalal. "These women did a good job in coming together."

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