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Where Is My Name? Afghan Women Campaign To Reclaim Their Identities

15th July, 2017

In Afghanistan's staunchly patriarchal society, women are often publicly identified by the names of their male relatives.

Their identity derives from their relationship with men — who are seen as their owners.

Afghan women live their lives as someone's daughter, sister, or wife and often don't have an identity of their own.

When girls are born in Afghanistan, it takes some families weeks to give them a name — and when a woman dies, her death notice and tombstone will often bear the name of her husband.

For Afghan men, revealing the names of their female relatives in public is considered shameful and dishonorable.

But a group of young women are trying to eradicate many of these long-standing taboos in their lives and help women reclaim their identities.

They have launched a campaign called Where is My Name? to highlight the issue and push men and, even women, to address women by their names.

In the first place, they say women should be identified by their given names and not those of their fathers and husbands.

The group says it believes giving women back their names is the first important step in encouraging them to assert their rights in a society where violence and abuse against women remain major problems.

Twenty-five-year-old Laleh Osmany, who initiated the campaign from the western Afghan city of Herat, tells RFE/RL that the movement wants to help women regain their “most basic right.”

“We’re fighting to win back our name and our identity,” she said. “We want women to be recognized as independent human beings with an identity.”

Osmany says that “in all families when a woman dies her name doesn’t appear on her death notice; when a woman gets married her name doesn’t appear on her wedding announcement; and women’s names are not mentioned on doctor’s prescriptions either.”

Tahmineh Rashiq, another campaign founder, told RFE/RL’s Radio Free Afghanistan that men should be able to utter the name of their mother, sister, and wife in public without feeling ashamed.

“It shouldn’t be shameful,” she said in an interview in her home in Kabul.

Rashiq said she and many other women are fed up with being identified with someone else.

“I’m tired of being called the daughter or mother of someone,” she said.

The Where Is My Name? campaign is gaining support among women and also men who have been posting on social media under the campaign’s hashtag, #whereismyname, and changing their profile picture to the campaign’s flyer.

“I joined this campaign and proudly posted the name of my mother and wife on Facebook,” campaign supporter Saadat Musavi told RFE/RL.

Osmany says the campaign has even started a debate within the country.

“We launched the campaign in cyberspace and we made good use of it,” she said. “The issue is now being debated in the real world — people and media are now talking about it.”

Many have praised the campaign for highlighting discrimination against women and attempting to raise awareness.

But there is also criticism.

“Is [this] really the main concern of Afghan women? If they’re being called by their names, will their problems be resolved?” read a comment posted on Facebook.

But campaign organizers say without having their own identity, women will remain invisible and powerless in society.

“A woman without a concrete identity will not defend her rights,” campaign supporter Khadijeh Nabiyyar told the Afghan daily 8am.

Since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, Afghan women have, among other things, regained the right to go to school, to vote, and to work. But many still face violence at the hands of male relatives that too often goes unpunished.

Osmany hopes her campaign to help allow women have an identity is the beginning of a movement that could help improve Afghan women’s lives in many ways.

With reporting by Radio Free Afghanistan broadcaster Tameem Akhgar

