EDUCATE AFGHAN GIRLS: SUSTAIN THE NATION

Inequalities in Educational Opportunities for Girls Jeopardize a Sustainable Future for Afghanistan

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1. Introduction

Educate Afghan girls: sustain the nation: This Seminar is a '*Crie de Coeur'* to each of you to maintain vigilance for the rights of Afghan women when international troops withdraw next year and the media moves on. To build a sustainable Afghanistan, girls must be educated on an equal basis with boys. No country, let alone one ravaged by 30 years of war can prosper without the productivity of half its citizens. The World Bank says it best: educating girls delivers a higher return than any other investment in the developing world. ***- (1) Lawrence Summers, Chief Economist, World Bank.***

We are not academics but, like many Canadian women, were first influenced to advocate for Afghan women by Canadian journalist Sally Armstrong who in her book Bitter Roots Tender Shoots describes the fragile position of the women of Afghanistan. Another outstanding influence was Afghan physician and human rights activist, Dr. Sima Samar. Her moral courage and dedication opened our minds and hearts when she addressed the Canadian Federation of University Women AGM in Ottawa in 2010.

2. Geography

Figure 1

The rugged country of Afghanistan, landlocked by Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran, is located in one of the most politically turbulent areas of the world. One of the poorest and least literate countries, it is the most dangerous in which to live as a woman. War is endemic and has continued unabated for the lifetime of most its citizen.

3. Demographic analyses

The Afghans say, “Education is the Light in the Eye”, but sadly few Afghans of either sex have access to that light, including the demographic from which a pool of leaders must be chosen to lead the government, the military and civil society.

Only 29% of adults are literate. Even the level and quality of schooling available is inadequate. While 12% of adult women can read, only a quarter of those who have primary school education are able to read a simple sentence. In rural populations, which make up 70% of the country, 81% of both men and women have no education. - ***(2) Afghanistan Multiple Cluster Survey 2010/11 (UNICEF/UNESCO).***

Education has improved dramatically since the Taliban’s misogynist regime, when girls were prohibited from attending school. Due to the work of the Ministry of Education and a plethora of international aid agencies, there are now 7.5 million children attending school; 2.9 million of that number is girls. Unhappily, in total, roughly six million Afghan children still do not attend school for a variety of reasons***.- (2) Ibid.***

The Qur’an and Afghanistan’s Constitution commit to education for girls, but the will of the government to move rights from paper to reality is compromised by tribal culture and the lack of a justice system to back legislation.

While women in the cities are overcoming barriers, in reality there are no rights for women in the harsh unwritten laws that govern the tribes of Afghanistan.

Figure 2

4. Obstacles to education

The 2011 Oxfam Report, *High Stakes*, notes that efforts to improve education have slowed and warns a new approach is necessary from both the Afghan government and donors to sustain the gains that have been made. The following chart clearly shows the key obstacles for Afghan girls.

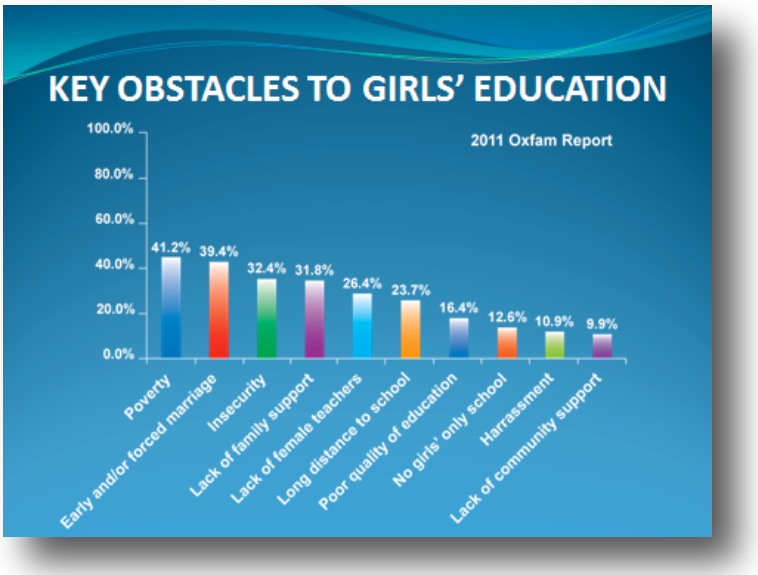

Figure 3

POVERTY: According to a UN World Development Report in 2012, poverty is the greatest barrier across the world to a girl's education, and over half of Afghans live in devastating poverty.

EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGES: Girls are forced into arranged marriages for a bride price, which the family may use to settle debts, an impetus to early marriage often to much older men. Education stops with marriage, which often precedes puberty.

INSECURITY: Personal safety is always at risk.

LACK OF FAMILY SUPPORT: Families are large and girls are needed to do domestic labour at home.

LACK OF FEMALE TEACHERS: Trained women teachers are few and persistently harassed.

LONG DISTANCE TO SCHOOL: One of the greatest deterrents to attending school is getting there, often a two-hour trudge there and back.

POOR QUALITY OF EDUCATION: Teachers at the schools they reach are often unqualified, with few resources, little curriculum, and in their defense, are paid very little.

NO GIRLS-ONLY SCHOOLS: Girls-only schools are few, and often far from home, poorly built, without electricity, latrines or the security walls to protect female students.

HARRASSMENT: Girls risk constant physical and sexual harassment.

LACK OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT: Both family and community support are too often lacking frequently due to tribal interpretation of religion and culture.

4.1 How to improve educational access

The Oxfam Report 2011 and the *IFUW Education Advocacy Handbook* make a number of practical recommendations to improve both access and quality of education for girls.

- Improve safety and security of schools
- Involve parents and community in decisions and implementation
- Increase number of female friendly, well-equipped schools
- Increase number and quality of female teachers
- Redouble efforts to improve secondary and higher education
- Review Ministry of Education policies to ensure gender sensitive
- Increase adult literacy & out-of-school learning
- Ensure girls' access to education not sacrificed in political settlement

5. Long-term benefits of education

If a girl does finish secondary school, her contributions to the sustainability of a civil society increase dramatically.

She will have delayed marriage, will give birth when she is fully grown, and will seek health care for herself and her family, raise literate children who will attend school. She will provide good nutrition and hygiene, vaccines and clean water for her family. She will vote and teach her children to vote. She may get a job outside the home and by contributing to family income, empower her position in the family.

And of course her impact will not only be felt in her lifetime but cumulatively in the lives of future generations.

Courtesy of Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WA)

Figure 4

6. Sustainable education

Gains have been made in women's rights to education, but they are fragile and too often based on funding from the international community.

To be sustainable, donors must:

1. Listen to the Afghan people. Born into the nuances of their culture, they must be consulted, and included at every step. Otherwise when foreign aid ends, programs not rooted in Afghan culture or grafted onto existing Afghan-initiated projects will disappear.
2. Assure funding. Politicians need to recognize that educating a country is a slow and long-term proposition. Administrators of international aid must know that funding will continue so that they can develop sustainable and efficacious programmes for the future.
3. Co-ordinate school programmes with the Afghan Ministry of Education. One of the cardinal rules of aid is that financial support comes to a planned end and financing is taken over by the developing country. Only educational aid that is in compliance with Ministry of Education priorities will have a chance of being sustained once the international community leaves.
4. Partner with other aid agencies to be effective. More than 40 international aid agencies and trusts are stationed in Afghanistan with differing mandates. A recent Canadian initiative has brought these groups together to ensure that projects and programs work together and enhance each other's success.
5. In the future change the dilemma of tied aid. In the past less than 18% of international donations reached the people of Afghanistan. In the future this must change.
6. Must deal with corruption and lack of security. They are endemic and must deal with by the Afghan government. And the international community must demand free and fair elections in 2014.

7. Success stories

During our research we found many outstanding examples of large donor successes, but we also found sterling examples of small projects relying on Afghan support and involvement that are remarkably creative, cost-effective, and because of their size, not burdened by rigid bureaucracy.

One example is *Canadian Women For Women in Afghanistan*. These women listen to the voices of Afghan women and work with Afghan partner organizations to build and open schools for girls, help with teacher training and curriculum, and so much more.

Another is Ryan Aldred, President of *The Canadian International Learning Foundation*, who, recognizing a dire need has spearheaded a foundation that brings employment–oriented education to Afghan girls through distance learning from Canada.

And there is Dr. Samar. If women are truly to take their rightful place in Afghanistan, they must be educated beyond the Secondary School level. Dr. Samar, who is a fervent believer that education is the key to socio-economic development and the sustainability of a civil society, has an answer *(see Appendix A).* In addition to her *Shuhada Organization*, she has built the *Gawharshad Institute of Higher Education* to prepare a pool of learned women from which to choose the leaders of the future. Our small CFUW-Ottawa group gives scholarships to Dr. Samar's girls annually.

One of the most widespread and effective programmes leading to sustainability is the National Solidarity Programme. Adapted by the Afghan government in 2003, and with large donor support, it helps villages identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects. When a village decides on an initiative in education, there is pride in ownership and the project has a greater chance of succeeding.

And there is HOPE.

Both women and youth have found their voice and, although tenuous, it is growing. More than half the Afghan population is under 15 and many have a huge window on the world through electronic technology and mobile phones. Tech-savvy youth are using the Internet to communicate and bring energy to groups wanting to go through that window into a world with more choices. In the rural areas, radio provides that window.

Women are in parliament and there is no turning back. Women have opened Internet cafes and have joined forces to champion women's rights and their successes. A vibrant press is breaking silence to focus on the misogyny that is so pervasive. Women's groups are also communicating with the Afghan Diaspora and appealing to their male contemporaries in the struggle for gender equality.

One truly remarkable example of hope is the *National Youth Orchestra of Afghanistan*, half street kids and a 1/3 girls, who recently performed with great acclaim to sold out concerts in New York City, Boston and Washington. Little more than a decade ago these children would have been risking their lives to play music. During the 90's it was banned by the Taliban. The presence of them performing now in the world's greatest concert halls shows positive change in Afghanistan. In a BBC clip of a U.S. concert in February 2013, Mr. Asif Nang, Afghanistan Deputy Education Minister emphasizes that music is very important to the sustainable development in the country.

8. Conclusion

We believe there is hope for a peaceful and sustainable civil society in Afghanistan, if women are allowed to take their rightful place in that society. Working within their cultural context, they too must continue to seek solutions to their untenable situation.

With the aid and encouragement of the international community, the Afghan government will continue to invest in women's education, so that eventually the old proverb *Women Hold Up Half the Sky* will be less an aspiration and more a reality.

What can IFUW members do?

Do not let the women of Afghanistan be forced to relinquish the gains they have made. Raise awareness of their plight in your communities. Develop creative actions to help them. Speak out for them as you do for all women, so they may reach the light of literacy and a productive peaceful future.

Educate Afghan girls: Sustain the nation.

Appendix I

Courtesy Cynthia Burek, PG.D. – UK

Hally Siddons (left) joined by Dr. Sima Samar

Dr. Sima Samar, Chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, medical doctor, educator, and creative visionary brought invaluable Afghan perspective to the discussion that followed the presentation of the paper.

Dr. Samar's Message:

- Education is a basic human right that must be available to all including women and girls.
- Educated girls will become informed mothers who will provide education, health care and nutrition for their families thereby improving the overall Afghan economy.
- Afghanistan cannot wait for the right environment to provide and promote full access to education: access must begin now even in a time of conflict.
- Only education of both men and women will change Afghanistan's tribal society.
- Educated women at the negotiating table will help to build sustainable peace, not only in Afghanistan but in the larger region.
- Education is the tool to reach a secure, stable and peaceful Afghan society.

References

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2. Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan

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     and many other valuable resources on their website, *www.cw4wafghan.ca*

3. World Bank Development Report 2012: - *Gender Equality and Development*

4. Social Audits in Afghanistan: Making Local Governance More Transparent
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13. National Report on the Situation of Adult Learning and Education Ministry of Education,
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14. High Stakes: Girls' Education in Afghanistan 2012 - *Oxfam*

15. The Manley Report 2008

16. Countless newspaper articles since early 2009: - *The Toronto Globe and Mail, The Ottawa Citizen, The New York Times, The London Times, The Telegraph*

Interviews, Meetings, and Talks

His Excellency Barna Karimi	Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Dr. Sima Samar	Chair Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
Noorjahan Akbar	Young Women for Change
William Crosbie	Canada's former Ambassador to Afghanistan
Brian Proskurniak	Director, Afghanistan, CIDA *(Canadian International Development Agency)*
Lawrence Peck	CIDA Assistant Director, Afghanistan
Mr. Jawed Ludin	Former Afghan Ambassador to Canada
Mrs. Zuhra Bahman-Ludin	University teacher and activist, Kabul
Dr. Genevieve Gasser	CIDA Senior Policy Adviser
Chris Alexander	Canada's first Ambassador to Afghanistan currently, MP and Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Defense
Dr. Nipa Banerjee	Professor in international development at Ottawa University, ran Canada's aid programme in Afghanistan
Hon. Flora MacDonald	Former Minster of External Affairs, founder Future Generations
Senator Salma Ataullahjan	Member, Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, Canada
Hon. Mobina Jaffer	Chair, Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, Canada
Mr. Ershad Ahmadi	Former Charge d'Affaires, Embassy of Afghanistan
Ryan Aldred	President, Canadian International Learning Foundation
Sally Armstrong	Author, Veiled Threat, Bitter Roots Tender Shoots
Sadiqa Basiri,	Graduate student, University of Ottawa, Executive Director of the Oruj Learning Centre in Afghanistan
Diba Hareer,	Former Program Coordinator at Medica Afghanistan, now graduate student at Ottawa University
Maryam Sahar	Former translator for the Canadian Forces, now studying in Canada
Madeliene Tarasick	President, Canadian Women for Women In Afghanistan
Dr. Lauryn Oates	Projects Director Canadian Women for Women In Afghanistan
Jennifer Blinkerton	Education Director, Aga Khan Foundation
Lindsay Mossman	Women's Human Rights, Amnesty International
Eileen Olexiuk	Canada's Deputy Head of Mission, Kabul, 2002
Hedvig Christine Alexander	International development, founder Jali Designs
Ghulam Farouq Samin	Medical doctor, translator and media, Afghanistan
Mohammad Tariq Ismati	Executive Director National Solidarity Programme,
Kabujl Fatima Gailani	President, Afghan Red Crescent Society
Hussaib Ramoz	Afghanistan and Ottawa, democracy and human rights activist
Chris Eaton	Executive Director, World University Services, Canada
Edward Giradet,	Media
Naheed Mustafa,	Media
Paul Watson:	Media

Books

The Long Way Back	Chris Alexander
Come from the Shadows	Terry Glavin
Under an Afghan Sky	Mellissa Fung
Land of the Unconquerable	Heath & Zahedi
Letters to My Daughters	Fawzia Koofi
Culture and Customs of Afghanistan	Hafizullah Emadi
Afghanistan 101	Elisan Entezar
Afghanistan: A Modern History	Angela Rasanayagam
Veiled Threat	Sally Armstrong
Bitter Roots, Tender Shoots	Sally Armstrong
A Woman Among Warlords	Malalai Joya
The Places in Between	Rory Stewart
A Bed of Red Roses	Nelofer Pazir
The Dressmaker of Khair Khana	Gayle Tzemach Lemmon

About the Authors:

Dianne Rummery, active in her community, has worked as a journalist and in public affairs.

Hally Siddons is a life-long educator and committed to volunteer activities. She is passionate about empowering Afghan women through education, surely a basic human right, and is convinced there is much we can do to support them on their journey.