

a fervent Desire^{to} Learn

By Jodi Lipson

Since U.S.-led forces overthrew the Taliban, more than 1 million Afghan girls have emerged from their homes, shed their burqas, and started school. This is their triumphant story. But this is also the distressing story of millions of other girls who stayed—or returned—home.



Photos by Greg Mortenson

In the village of Jurkani, Uzra Faizad, the school principal, coordinates three shifts of 3,400 students—bright, eager, young girls among them.

But in a classroom in Kabul, police beat a teacher for talking to his female students.

Since the lifting of Taliban edicts banning girls from school, a strong cadre of individuals such as Faizad, aid agencies, and indigenous groups work to educate girls in Afghanistan. But despite the progress, many barriers—violence against teachers as well as students just one—persist.

Context

Officially, primary school education has been free and compulsory in Afghanistan since 1935.

Yet in 1979, well before the Taliban, the literacy rate for girls stood at an estimated 4 percent. The literacy rate for boys, by contrast, reached 30 percent.

Still, all provinces had girls' primary schools, reports UNESCO, and women served in occupations ranging from doctors to teachers to politicians.

The Soviet occupation from 1979 to 1989 and the civil war that followed wrought terror, destruction, and displacement. The school system was largely destroyed, according to the United Nations. The Taliban gained control in 1996. According to the Taliban's interpretation, Islamic law forbids girls from attending schools. For the most part, girls were essentially prisoners in their own homes, according to Human



Rights Watch. Some girls had lessons at home; most did not.

Following the Taliban's collapse, schools opened their doors to girls. With no previous education, half the children, regardless of their ages, entered first grade. Today, according to UNICEF, one-third of those students are girls.

Changes

Greg Mortenson, like principal Uzra Faizad, is one of the people who make education a reality for Afghan girls. Director of the Central Asia Institute and a member of the AAUW Bozeman (MT) Branch, Mortenson has spent his last 10 years educating Muslim children, especially girls.

"If you educate a boy, you educate an individual," he says, paraphrasing the African proverb. "If you educate a girl, you educate a community." Women stay in the villages and raise their children, he explains. "Educate girls to fifth grade, and you reduce infant mortality,

diminish the population explosion, and improve the basic indices of health."

Mortenson has launched some 30 secular schools, reaching 3,500 girls.

His mission began in Pakistan when he attempted—and failed—to climb the world's second-highest peak. Weak and dehydrated, he stumbled down to a village, where he was nursed back to health. To repay such generosity, he vowed to support education.

Mortenson's lessons began. The first: collaboration.

"One day the village chief ... led me by the arm to a cliff overlooking a great panorama of mountains," Mortenson recounts. "He said, 'You are our brother and my home is your home. But you need to let us do the planning and work ourselves. We have lived here for 600 years. We can help you. I promise it will work.'"

Today, Mortenson goes only where he's welcome and invited, where he finds a "fervent desire to learn." Villagers match project funds with local resources and labor. The schools are theirs.

Mortenson learned to negotiate methodically, level by level. Rounds of tea with government officials and spiritual leaders replaced American power lunches. He tried skipping a step once (visiting an official alone instead of waiting for his liaison) and was abducted, he admits. He survived, but he learned his second lesson: patience. Planning takes months, or years.

Mortenson and his Central Asia Institute focused on remote Pakistan regions until the day a dozen nomads approached on horseback, knee-high black boots caked with mud. The conversation went something like this: We heard you fund schools. We want a school. Will you come with us? Mortenson followed them to their Afghan village, where he agreed to pay for teachers' salaries and supplies for a tented school. Today Mortenson has two schools in Afghanistan and is fostering community support for a third.

To encourage girls' attendance, the institute applies conditions for continuing support. Each year the school must enroll 10 percent more girls. (What happens to the students if it doesn't? Not to worry, says outreach director Catherine Kirkland. No school has yet come up short.) The Central Asia Institute also funds health-care training, including a full-time chaperone when women attend training in

cities, and other vocational support. None of this, Mortenson says, conflicts with Islamic law.

“I’ve spent years talking with hardened Islamic clerics,” says Mortenson, who consulted with the Supreme Council of Ayatollahs in Iran, among others. “Without exception, they tell me that Islam’s holy book, the *Quran*, does not prohibit girls’ education. In fact, it values and encourages education for all people.”

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan works under that same premise. Operating clandestinely for 26 years to advance women’s rights, RAWA has run underground schools in Afghanistan and in Pakistan refugee camps, according to Alicia Lucksted, who presented on behalf of RAWA at the AAUW Educational Foundation’s 2002 international symposium. Post-Taliban, says Lucksted, “RAWA doesn’t have to be quite so clandestine. The Taliban is not killing teachers for teaching. But there are threats.”

Since RAWA’s founding, thousands of members and equal numbers of male supporters have risked their lives resisting the authority and documenting the atrocities of the Soviets, Taliban, and warlords. RAWA members have been imprisoned and tortured. Its founder was assassinated in 1987.

But RAWA has persisted, teaching in home-based schools and running literacy courses for women, men, girls, and boys alike to teach and, as subtext, address human rights issues. For the security of both RAWA and its students, no classes in Afghanistan have operated under RAWA’s name.

After the Taliban fell, the media celebrated wholesale liberation, says Anne Brodsky, author of *With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*, which chronicles the resilience of Afghan women and RAWA and how they can offer a model for indigenous human rights struggles. But RAWA for the most part remains underground.

“In [many] remote areas, our courses are the only source of education for girls, and many families happily send their girls,” e-mails Mehmooda, a RAWA member in Afghanistan.

In addition, some children who attended RAWA schools, Brodsky explains, wanted to stay with the same teachers. They trust the RAWA schools or fear attending the government schools. In addition, only 4,000 government schools opened—not enough to accommodate the millions of Afghan schoolchildren. Even



where government schools exist, RAWA offers supplemental courses in English, math, science, entrance exam preparation, and other courses that often truncated, overcrowded school shifts can’t cover. RAWA also teaches those not qualified for government school: married women and beginning students older than 15, who are not allowed to attend first grade.

Despite girls’ access to education under the law, RAWA is still at risk because, as the “R” boldly testifies, the group remains revolutionary, criticizing human rights violations by fundamentalist factions, some of whom are in power today.

“The first important issue was to educate women,” one of the original RAWA members told Brodsky. “If not educated, ... they aren’t able to change anything in their lives.”

In addition to RAWA and Mortenson, many other organizations and governments support girls in school. Among them, a campaign to end gender apartheid, launched by the Feminist Majority in coalition with 220 human rights and women’s rights organizations, runs a back-to-school campaign.

UNICEF has supported girls’ return by repairing schools, providing sanitation facilities, supplying tents to erect temporary classrooms, and delivering learning and teaching materials. At a 2002 summit in Tokyo, world leaders pledged \$4.5 billion over five years for Afghanistan’s reconstruction. At the time *AAUW Outlook* went to press, the U.S. Congress was considering an \$87 billion aid package for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Challenges

But most of that money doesn’t reach Afghanistan schools. According to the Feminist Majority, less than two-thirds of the \$4.5 billion in international aid, which falls far short of the dollars needed to rebuild the country, has

What you can do—

- Urge your members of Congress to appropriate funds for Afghanistan's reconstruction.
- Advocate for women's and girls' access to education and other basic freedoms and rights.
- Support disarmament and the expansion of peacekeepers.

materialized. Only 1 percent of the U.S. \$87 billion would reach Afghanistan. And where the money does get through, 84 percent of international funds support the military, according to CARE.

With lack of funding, government schools are limited and teachers receive low or no pay. Uzra Faizad, in the village of Jurkani, hasn't been paid in months. And despite aid, improvements in legal processes, and access to education, Taliban dictates often prevail. Islamic law, fundamentalists still insist, bans education for girls.

In August 2003, extremists burnt down a tented girls' school. In September, attackers set an elementary school on fire, distributing leaflets saying girls should not be allowed to attend school and threatening teachers who

taught girls. More than 30 girls' schools have been attacked since September 2002, according to the Feminist Majority.

Even with school doors open, girls generally attend only primary school. And many girls don't go because it's dangerous to leave the house.

"Discrimination, violence, and insecurity remain rife, despite promises by world leaders ... that the war in Afghanistan would bring liberation for women" reads an Amnesty International October 2003 report.


Girls and their teachers risk harassment, attack, rape, sexual violence, and abduction by police, soldiers, and warlords, among others.

According to UNICEF, children as young as four years old have been kidnapped and sold. "The illegal abduction and trafficking of children is contrary to several articles of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Afghanistan has ratified," says UNICEF Representative Sharad Sapra. In some instances, troops have ransomed girls back to their families.

Despite Afghan and international law, forced and underage marriage—which precludes education—are also widespread. The Amnesty International report highlights "Fariba," age 8, who was forced to marry a 48-year-old man. Fariba's father reportedly received 600,000 Afghani. Across the country, "girls and women are treated as an economic asset," according to the study.

In some regions, practice has become policy. Despite a shortage of female teachers, new rules in western Afghanistan ban male teachers from teaching females and girls and boys from being in the same school buildings at the same time. Bringing girls and boys together contradicts Islamic law, according to fundamentalists. In an unsettling Catch-22, the occurrence of sexual violence by armed groups is used to justify restrictions on women's rights and freedoms.

For millions of girls in Afghanistan, the message is clear: Despite government regulations, you don't belong in schools.


But for more than 1 million other girls, principals like Uzra Faizad open their doors each morning. 

Jodi Lipson is editor of AAUW Outlook and associate director of communications for publications at AAUW.

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AAUW Educational Foundation
1111 Sixteenth St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202/728-7602
TDD: 202/785-7777
Fax: 202/463-7169
www.aauw.org