

What Works: Lessons in Courage

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Lessons in Courage

Against all odds, the Afghan Institute of Learning educates women and girls in a war-torn society **BY SUZIE BOSS**

IN AFGHANISTAN, GRIEF IS never far away. “You are always losing somebody,” says Sakena Yacoobi. A native of Afghanistan, Yacoobi has lost friends and colleagues to bombings and kidnappings. She has seen routine health matters turn fatal for want of basic medical care.

When the losses pile up and Yacoobi gets to feeling “a little down,” she asks her bodyguard to drive her to a nearby preschool. There, it doesn’t take long before this short woman in a hijab is smiling. “I see kids singing, drawing, playing, learning. Their happiness is my happiness,” she says, “and I am ready to go 100 miles per hour again.”

For more than a decade, Yacoobi has devoted her considerable energies to rebuilding educational opportunities in a country that had almost forgotten how to learn. The Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL), which she founded in 1995, now reaches 350,000 women and girls annually with programs that extend from preschool through university. In addition, men and boys benefit from AIL’s leadership training, which promotes peaceful strategies for resolving conflict. AIL also provides health education, operates medical clinics, and teaches income-generating vocational skills like carpet weaving. Through all these initiatives, AIL emphasizes critical thinking “so that people can learn to think for themselves,” Yacoobi says.

Yacoobi’s courageous efforts—at times in the face of death threats—have earned her some of the world’s highest humanitarian honors: the Gleitsman International Activist Award from Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, the Henry R. Kravis Prize in Leadership, and the Gruber Women’s Rights Prize. She is the first Ashoka fellow from Afghanistan, a recipient of the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship, and one of 1,000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. Yet Yacoobi modestly insists that the credit really belongs to “all the women of Afghanistan.”

STARTING WITH NOTHING

Formal education was not part of the Yacoobi family tradition when Sakena was growing up in Herat, a city in northwestern Afghanistan. Nonetheless, her Muslim parents fed her passion for learning. Instead of marrying her off when she reached her teens, they sent her to the United States to further her studies. She had earned two de-

grees and embarked on a career as a college professor in Michigan when, in 1992, she decided to return to help her compatriots. During the nine-year Soviet conflict, thousands of Afghans—including her parents—had fled across the border into Pakistan. Yacoobi came to Peshawar, Pakistan, to coordinate women’s education programs for the International Rescue Committee.

In the refugee camps, Yacoobi looked past the daily hardships and tried to imagine a future. “I saw all these young women and girls sitting there with nothing to do,” she recalls. “I wondered, how are they ever going to function in society?” For the Afghan people to to recover, she thought, they needed to rediscover the joy of learning.

Every year, an estimated 40 million children worldwide have their education interrupted by conflict, according to Save the Children. In Afghanistan, three decades of war “devastated our educational system,” Yacoobi says, leaving almost an entire generation unschooled. Even in regions where schools managed to stay open, “people stopped feeling safe enough to send their children.” By 2000, Afghanistan’s adult literacy rate had plummeted to 28 per-

When not resuscitating Afghanistan’s education system, AIL’s Sakena Yacoobi likes getting back to the classroom.



cent—and only 12 percent for women—reports the *CIA World Factbook*.

DARING TO LEARN

In Peshawar, Yacoobi set out to recruit a new corps of teachers, most of them women. She wrote teacher-training manuals that emphasized interactive, student-centered activities. Requiring minimal supplies, these activities were designed to spark children's creativity, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving skills—a radical departure from traditional Afghan teaching, which stresses rote memorization and unquestioning respect for teachers. Indeed, current U.S. initiatives to prepare students for the 21st century encourage similar student-centered practices.

"We also taught the teacher how to be a friend to students, not just an authority," Yacoobi adds. This softer approach would help rebuild trust in a generation of children who had been traumatized by war and dislocation, she reasoned.

After the Soviet-Afghan War ended in February 1989, Yacoobi sought to bring these methods into Afghanistan. She founded AIL in 1995, just as the Taliban came to power. Under the Taliban's harsh rules, women and girls were prohibited "from even having a book in their hand," Yacoobi recalls. So AIL went underground, teaching girls who dared to learn in a clandestine network of 80 home-based schools, which served more than 3,000 students in several cities and provinces.

Private donors—including Yacoobi herself—funded the schools. But entire communities kept the students safe. Village lookouts guarded while girls learned to read. People smuggled scarce books from home to home, and teachers constantly changed class times to throw off suspicious neighbors and officials. Yacoobi was always on the move, traveling with bodyguards and living out of a suitcase. As a result, the Taliban never uncovered a single home school.

AN ECOSYSTEM FOR CHANGE

Since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, aid agencies have prioritized the education of Afghan youth. Afghanistan's Ministry of Education is getting help from organizations like Save the Children, which has launched a major education campaign in conflict zones. *Three Cups of Tea* author Greg Mortenson is leading another high-profile initiative to build schools for girls in former Taliban strongholds. Although Afghanistan remains far from peaceful, school enrollment has jumped from 1 million in 2002 to nearly 7 million today, while the number of teachers has increased eightfold to 160,000.

But obstacles remain. Only one in four teachers has more than a high school education, prompting a *Christian Science Monitor* reporter to describe an Afghan classroom as a case of "the blind leading the blind." Rural areas struggle to attract and pay qualified teachers.

AIL is drawing on its hard-earned experience to improve this picture. Now able to operate openly, it focuses on improving teacher quality. At the government's request, AIL trains teachers throughout Herat province and freely disseminates its materials. More than 13,000 teachers have participated in AIL's intense 24-day workshops, which means better education for 400,000 students.

KEEP LEARNING ALIVE

Secure community support for education

Teach people to teach themselves

Fight disease, poverty, and other problems that interfere with learning

Meanwhile, through more than 40 Women's Learning Centers in several provinces, AIL provides direct services. Women often arrive at these village centers with their children. AIL offers programs for both generations, including preschool programs—once unheard of in Afghanistan—and a fast-track program for women and older girls who never learned even basic skills. Women can continue with individualized instruction and vocational training, as well as with university

programs in nursing, teacher education, and information technology.

To reduce infant and maternal mortality rates—among the worst in the world—AIL trains birth attendants and teaches reproductive health education and hygiene. As Yacoobi explains, "It's all about helping people learn to take care of themselves." AIL also operates several health clinics.

These interconnected initiatives add up to big impact, which attracts support from funders like the Skoll Foundation. "We are thrilled to support an organization that is making transformational, sustainable change in critical root issues in a global hot spot," says Skoll program officer Edwin Ou. He notes that AIL has created an ecosystem for change by training teachers, health educators, and administrators, as well as by working with partners to replicate its programs. Under Yacoobi's leadership, he adds, AIL has become "a high-performing organization and movement of lasting change that is greater than any one person, including Sakena herself."

Similar praise comes from *Half the Sky* authors Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. They argue that American aid organizations would accomplish more by simply writing AIL a check "rather than dispatching their own representatives to Kabul."

RAISING CITIZENS

Even as its staff has grown to 480 (mostly women) and its annual budget to almost \$1 million, AIL has kept the same philosophy. "We never go anywhere except at the request of the people," says Yacoobi. Even then, AIL accepts invitations with a caveat: No matter how poor, villagers "are always expected to do something—build a roof, make a garden, provide a doorkeeper for security," Yacoobi says. "This makes the program part of the community and builds pride."

Likewise, AIL seeks support from private foundations and individuals, rather than from government groups, which might have their own agendas. "We don't want to be told where to work," Yacoobi says. She also wants to be able to assure communities that "we are there for the long term." AIL's future ambitions include opening an orphanage, building a fully equipped hospital, and updating its technology training center.

Eventually, these initiatives "will allow our people to be self-supporting," Yacoobi says, "and that's what we want." Meanwhile, she travels the globe to seek support for AIL programs and to advocate for the protection of women's rights.

Occasionally, an interviewer asks Yacoobi if she has any regrets. "People look at me and say: 'Oh, you never married. You don't have children.' But I have thousands and thousands of kids," she says with pride, "and every one of them is becoming a good citizen." ■