



FOOD FOR THOUGHT: APRIL 2012

Theme: Sustaining Educational Gains in Afghanistan

"Women I have met want nothing more than peace. But they fear that the world is growing eager to reach a deal in which their rights will be part of the security." – Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, The Dressmaker of Khair Khana



Progress in girls' education in the last ten years has been a rare Afghan success story, but many in the aid community now fear that progress may be at risk, according to a report issued in 2011 by Oxfam, CARE and 14 other international aid agencies, including Afghan NGOs.

The report, titled, "High Stakes" shows that, under the Taliban government, the majority of girls' schools were closed and enrollment fell from 32 percent to

only 6.4 percent. Under the Taliban, only 5,000 girls were enrolled in school. But after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, thanks to a combined response from the world community and increasing cultural emphasis on education, great gains in girls' education were made. About 2.4 million girls were currently enrolled, and about 2281 new schools were built by 2011, according to the report.

That is not to say that the education system is good, or even adequate, in Afghanistan. The "High Stakes" report says that 47 percent of Afghan schools do not even have a building in which to hold classes. Many of those schools have no sanitation or water. Among those that

According to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission Report, 51.6 per cent of parents mention that the main factor preventing girls from attending primary school is accessibility and security. Other reported reasons why girls do not attend primary school are that the girls have to work (12.1 per cent), poverty (10.1 per cent) and child marriage (3.7 per cent).

have even the most basic facilities, finding and paying for adequate staffing, especially female teachers, is a major issue.

According to the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, Afghanistan has one of the highest proportions of school-aged (7-12) children in the world. About 1 in 5 Afghans is a school-aged child. Despite success in sending children to school, trends in gender disparity in education remains worrisome.

Ongoing conflicts and instability, grinding poverty, forced or early marriages continue to be factors preventing girls from attending or staying in schools. In 2009, there were still, on average, 50 attacks on schools each month, the report points out. Girls often have to leave school to help support their families or because their families simply cannot afford transportation or uniforms. Yet, progress has been made, and concerns are mounting in the global community that Afghanistan's educational gains might be all too short-lived.

With many NATO nations focused on handing over security responsibilities to the Afghan government, worries about how girls' education will fare in the future are on the rise. The province of Ghazni, the focus of this month's project, is especially vulnerable. Ghazni is one of the three most uneducated areas in the world. In fact, the gender disparity in education in the region prompted the United Nations to declare the region one of the three most impacted in the world. Therefore, it is critical to correct this situation to reach the 2015 UN Millennium Development Goals of universal education and gender equality. That is where the Afghan Friends Network steps in.

Millennium Development Goals

The Afghan Friends Network addresses two of the UN's Millennium Development Goals: to "Promote gender equality and empower women" and "Achieve universal primary education" by 2015.

The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative also reports that early marriages are very common; the mean age at first marriage in Afghanistan is 17 years, according to the 2003 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), the latest data source available on early marriages. The MICS also describes that child marriages account for 43 per cent of all marriages.

- Goal 2: Promote gender equality and empower women
 - One of the most critical steps in empowering women is in giving them the knowledge and training to make their own living. One of the functions of the KLC is to give women, especially widows and mother with families to support, basic literacy vocational skills, so that they may earn their own income. Additionally, the KLC is staffed by more men than women at a ratio of 4:1, providing jobs and income for its employees.
- Achieve universal primary education

- In the Ghazni region of Afghanistan, where the KLC is located, there is less than 10% literacy rate. The KLC takes students, ranging in age from 5-year-old girls to widowed mothers seeking a means to support their family, divides the students into classes based on ability and not age, and trains these students up to a twelfth- grade level, an unheard of level of education in recent Afghan history.



Discussion Questions

- 1) It would be a blow if Afghanistan's educational gains since 2001 are at all reversed. What do you think can and should be done immediately to keep the focus high on sustaining girls' education?
- 2) With the Dining for Women investment, Afghan Friends Network seeks to train 100 women in basic literacy and vocational skills, and also send 16 exceptional women to university, among other educational goals. How can you envision each of these individuals begin to make a difference, wherever they live in Afghanistan?
- 3) The world community rallied greatly after the fall of the Taliban in 2011 to help girls go back to school in record numbers. Do you think world sentiment will support girls' education after all NATO forces withdraw?