Aid Through Action:

Reconstructing Education and Health Systems in Afghanistan

From an early age, Dr. Sakena Yacoobi's father encouraged her to receive the best education possible. By the age of six, she had read all of the books at her local mosque, and she soon entered primary school. While many of her relatives suggested that she marry and stay in the home, she completed high school and applied to university. Anticipating the USSR's impending invasion of Afghanistan, her father urged her to attend school in the United States. After earning her undergraduate degree at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, she continued her education with a Master’s degree in public health at Loma Linda University. After graduating, Dr. Yacoobi worked as a professor at the University of Detroit before beginning work with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Pakistan in 1990. In her role with the IRC, Dr. Yacoobi conducted surveys and research
in Afghan refugee camps, where she witnessed a deficiency of opportunities for youth. Realizing the profound difference education had made in her life, Dr. Yacoobi decided to provide this service for Afghan children. She began by working with one local mullah to implement a curriculum for 300 girls in one camp. In this process, she handwrote eight teacher’s manuals and oversaw the management of the entire program. With the success of this basic school, the IRC offered additional support, and within one year Dr. Yacoobi was able to open 15 schools that supported 27,000 students in refugee camps in Pakistan. She directly supervised each school, trained teachers, and created a curriculum that emphasized health and peace.

With the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Dr. Yacoobi became increasingly worried about the severe restrictions on education, especially for women and young girls, put in place by the new leaders. For this reason, she returned to her home in 1995 to found the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) with $20,000 of her own money. From this point forward, Dr. Yacoobi dedicated her life to improving the health care and education systems in Afghanistan and providing these services to all Afghans who seek them. Originally, AIL started as an underground system of home schools for young girls who could not freely receive an education after the Taliban came to power. Right before the U.S.-led intervention against the Taliban, Dr. Yacoobi maintained 80 schools, which taught over 3,000 students.

With the fall of the Taliban, the Afghan Institute of Learning was able to make its efforts public and has since expanded to serve almost 300,000 students in 11 provinces of Afghanistan since its founding. AIL has also expanded its reach in education to all levels from preschool to university. In addition, AIL has expanded its focus from basic education to other fields, including human rights, health care, and leadership training. Outside of its classrooms, AIL has opened 15 medical clinics and instituted a community health workers program.

Dr. Yacoobi believes that working at the local level is essential to the success of her programs: “When you work at the grassroots level, working with all kinds of people, that power of people will never be matched by anything else.” For this reason, Dr. Yacoobi emphasizes the empowerment of women in her programs, and over 70 percent of the AIL staff are women.

Today, AIL is the biggest non-governmental agency in Afghanistan and is officially registered with the Ministries of Health, Education, Women’s Affairs, and Social Affairs. For her work, Dr. Yacoobi has received the Opus Prize, a premier humanitarian award and $1 million prize given to further her work. In 2005, she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2011, Afghan President Hamid Karzai presented Dr. Yacoobi with the National Peace Award. For all of her accolades, Dr. Yacoobi remains humble and attributes her success to the dedication of her team and the blessing of her own education, saying, “For me, this is [the] power of education. Education changed my life, and I feel that education is changing everybody’s life.”

What was it like growing up in Afghanistan?

Dr. Yacoobi: When I was growing up, Afghanistan was a beautiful country. When I was a child I could go in the street, play with my cousins, walk to school, and visit relatives without fear. Unlike Afghan children today, I never worried that I would be kidnapped or that a bomb was going to explode. I was never afraid that someone was going to be killed in front of me.

The Afghanistan of today is not the same as the Afghanistan of my childhood. In order to learn, children need to wake up in their homes, surrounded by their happy family. They need to feel safe. Instead of living the carefree life that a child should live, Afghan children go to school worried that their school will be raided or bombed. They stop class to ask their teacher if they can call home to check that their parents are safe. This is not the peaceful Afghanistan that I grew up knowing, but I am confident that if we keep working towards education and peace, we will get back to the country that I knew.

What can you tell us about your education? How important was it to you?

Dr. Yacoobi: I was the luckiest person: my father decided that no matter if his first-born child was a boy or a girl, he or she would be educated. He was not an educated man, but he ran a successful business and was determined that his children would be educated. At the age of four, he enrolled me in a school at a mosque and, by the time I was six, I had completed all of the religious books that the mullah had to teach me. When I started at the school, I had already completed two grades by studying at the mosque. I have such good memories of school! While some students were punished for being lazy or not studying very hard, I did well. School was important to me. I wanted to do well, and my father supported me.

As I completed high school, I saw that my education allowed me to help my father with his business. I could also see that it would be able to help women and children if I continued with my education and became a doctor. Around me, women were dying during childbirth, and children were dying young. I wanted to become a gynecologist so that I could help these women and children. I came to the United States to continue my education, and it changed my life. Education gave me a power that I would not have been able to get any other way. Every day I was learning, and I wanted to learn more. I could see that education had changed everything for me, so for me, education became the key issue. I realized that every woman and child should be able to be educated. If we are talking about how to empower people, education is how you do it. If we want to build a nation, we need to educate the people.

What inspires your work to improve the conditions of women and children in Afghanistan?

Dr. Yacoobi: I am inspired by the energy that I see coming out of the women in Afghanistan as they
work to improve their lives. I see them overcoming poverty, violence, and gender inequality. They really inspire me, and I want to help them find solutions to improve their lives. The Afghan Institute of Learning, the organization that I founded, is trying to change their lives in a sustainable way so that they can be independent. First, a woman needs to be educated, she needs to learn critical thinking skills, and she needs to learn about her rights as a human being. But before a woman can be free of violence, she must be economically empowered. We are working to find ways to help women learn what they need to become empowered economically, so that they will not be dependent on someone else.

How is women's education different now compared to before the Soviet invasion? Have any areas seen progress compared to the pre-Soviet years?

Dr. Yacoobi: Before the Soviet Union invaded, women were becoming educated, particularly in urban areas. They had opportunities to go to the universities, and many urban women did get a higher education. They became teachers, lawyers, doctors, parliament members, and more. There were still places where there were no schools, particularly in rural areas, making it difficult for women to get an education, but generally education for women was expanding.

After the Soviet invasion, education for women continued in large urban areas, but it became increasingly difficult for women in rural areas to be educated. When the Taliban came to power, education for girls and women was banned. Women could not go to school, they could not work, it was difficult to go outside, and they had no way to share ideas with others. There were secret, underground schools for some girls. For example, AIL supported 80 schools for 3000 girls. But, instead of millions attending school, just a few thousand were learning in small rooms from dedicated teachers.

In the last ten years, education for girls and women has taken a huge leap forward. Millions of women and girls are once again attending school. If the women are too old for school, then they are in learning centers like the centers that AIL supports. Some are going on to universities, and, once again in Afghanistan, women are becoming lawyers, engineers, teachers, governors, and maybe one day, president. We still have a long way to go. There are still places without schools and provinces where the majority are uneducated, but when you compare today to ten years ago, you can see that things have improved greatly.

When you founded AIL in 1995, what was the political and social climate like in Afghanistan?

Dr. Yacoobi: When I founded AIL, the Taliban were just beginning to come to power. In the area where they came to power, women were suffering. I founded AIL because I saw the difference education had made in my life, and I wanted to help others gain an education. I saw that women were miserable. They did not think they were capable of speaking or learning, and they felt devastated and hopeless. We started our education programs to teach people how to think critically and solve their own problems. We taught them about their religion, their culture, and their traditions, and we helped them to think about what they wanted for their lives, not what others were telling them they should want. When we began, some people were trying to use religion to scare people and gain power. Those trying to gain power were telling people “if you do this or that, you won’t be a good Muslim.” We taught people critical thinking skills so that they would question statements like these and decide for themselves how they wanted to think and how they wanted to live. Once the people began to be educated, they could see that education was not preventing them from being a good Muslim, and they spread this message to others.

What types of programs do you currently provide? Are you interested in expanding on these services?

Dr. Yacoobi: AIL presently has offices in Kabul and Herat, Afghanistan and in Peshawar, Pakistan. AIL serves more than 400,000 women, men, and children annually, is run by women, and employs about 430 Afghans, over 70 percent of whom are women. AIL offers pre-school through post-secondary education; training opportunities for teachers in interactive, critical thinking methodologies; training to members of civil society in subjects such as human rights, women’s rights, leadership, and peace; and health education and health care through its clinics and Community Health Workers.

Since AIL works with communities, AIL waits for communities to be ready for expansion. Sometimes this means waiting for a community to request services. For example, the community might ask AIL to establish a Learning Center in their village. Sometimes AIL will see a need within the community and will reach out to the community and with the community will develop programs based on that need.

For example, since late 2013, AIL has been hosting conferences to inform people about the upcoming election. Initially, AIL was requested to hold election workshops by the communities that it worked with. As AIL saw that many people did not understand how an election would impact their lives and that there were many misconceptions about the voting and how government officials are chosen, AIL announced that it was holding election workshops and many people have attended. AIL’s conferences strive to explain the rights, privileges, and responsibilities that come with living in a democracy, and many of the participants in the conferences leave excited about the idea of voting in April’s election, they then share this information with their friends and family.

In 2014, AIL has also begun hosting Women’s Networking Conferences which aim to help women make connections with other women and share information. Over the years, AIL’s Learning Centers have become places where women can network with
each other and share ideas. Women from the centers then asked AIL to find a way to have women from different centers and offices to meet and share ideas. The result is the Women’s Networking Conferences.

In the future, AIL plans to continue with its present programs and expand all of the programs and introduce new programs when there are requests and sufficient funding. AIL is constantly working to transform people and open their minds so that they can improve their lives and bring peace to the nation.

How has that role changed over the last two decades? Has Afghanistan changed as well?

Dr. Yacoobi: AIL’s core programs and values have not changed, but what is being offered in those core programs has expanded. AIL has gone from being a small organization to one of the largest women’s organizations in Afghanistan. Since our founding, our programs have touched the lives of over 11 million Afghans. Afghans see AIL as an organization that provides high-quality education, training, and health services according to the needs of the people. Afghans trust AIL and, as a result, continue to request programs from AIL which empower them. The result is that in the communities where AIL works, people are healthier, their economic situation is better, the people in the community are better educated, and the people are learning to solve their own problems. Afghanistan is still a very poor country, but it is changing, and AIL is helping to make this change happen. People are becoming more aware of their rights and the benefits of gender equality, democracy, and education. They are becoming empowered, and learning that they can take steps to change their lives.

Describe the people of Afghanistan today, after 40 years of hardships, and what you see for their future?

Dr. Yacoobi: We combat ethnic tensions by teaching that we are all human beings, no matter the color, tribe, or ethnicity. Everyone is to be respected. Everyone is equal. There are passages in the Qur’an that talk about this, and we use these passages to teach that we are all equal, and using these passages helps us get through to people and change their minds. In addition, we model this behavior. It is a slow process, but we are getting there. Today, if you ask people in Afghanistan where they are from, they will say Afghanistan. In the past, they might have answered with their village, tribe, or ethnic group, but more and more people will say they are Afghans. There are still areas where people will tell you they are from a particular village or tribe, but we keep working towards the idea that we are all human beings; we are all Afghans.

What attitudes toward women and girls do you see forming among young men in Afghanistan?

Dr. Yacoobi: AIL is working with both men and women on the issue of gender equality. We can see that the minds of young men are changing quickly. We see how these young men will encourage their mothers, wives, and sisters to go and become educated, or to learn a skill and earn an income outside the home. We work with thousands of young men, and we can see that they are treating the women in their lives different than they did in the past. We are working in a culture that has not had equality for thousands of years, so change in this area takes time. But AIL believes that this work is important, and we are seeing a change among the younger generation, which gives us hope and encourages us to continue educating young men about the benefits of gender equality.

How do you see your work and the work of AIL changing in the future?

Dr. Yacoobi: In the future, I hope that AIL will be able to establish more programs, which will provide higher education for Afghans in areas such as IT and health. I also hope that we will be able to use more technology to assist in our teaching and outreach. I hope that we will be able to have a presence in every province of Afghanistan, rather than the 3 where we have worked. I hope that our education programs will continue to expand and be available to more people. I would like to be able to expand our job training and offer more vocational training, which will allow both men and women to improve their economic situation.