

## SAKENA YACOobi & THE AFGHAN INSTITUTE OF LEARNING

### THE STORY:

Professor Sakena Yacoobi—a recipient of the Peter Gruber Woman’s Rights Prize, a Ashoka Fellowship and a Nobel Peace Prize Nomination—dedicates her career to her father, Mohammad, for despite his lack of formal education he greatly valued its importance and encouraged his daughter to leave war-torn Afghanistan and pursue a college degree. Sakena explains, "When I was (a girl) in Afghanistan, my father could have married me to someone. But my father asked me, 'Do you want to marry or do you want to study?' And I said, 'I want to study.' He said, 'As long as you want to study, I let you.'" Thus, in the 1970s Sakena—who read and wrote at the fourth grade level—left her marginalized community in Afghanistan to pursue higher education at University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, becoming the first member of her family to attend college. Sakena studied zealously and graduated with a degree in Biological Sciences. She went on to receive a Master’s degree in Public Health from Loma Linda University. In 1995, Sakena founded the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL), a female run and operated NGO, in order to provide marginalized Afghani girls and women with access to the resource which has greatly empowered her: education.



To combat this marginalization, AIL leads a wide variety of community based programs which are run by women with the purpose of empowering female community members to become active agents of social change. This approach has allowed AIL to gain momentum and it is now one of the largest women-led NGO’s in Afghanistan, providing health and educational services to 350,000 Afghani women annually. In order provide rural women with culturally sensitive health care and educational opportunities AIL has created “Women Learning Centers” which are community-based organizations that train teachers, provide health care and educational services—such as preschool through university classes—as well as workshops on human rights and income generating projects. The impact has been tremendous. Thanks to the Women Learning Centers 9,900 teachers have been trained, 1,200 women have received human rights education, and 3,000 children were provided with “underground” or secret home schooling in order to help them continue their education, which was hindered during the Taliban rule. In addition, AIL has set up four major health clinics with mobile branches that reach rural women who cannot make the journey to centers. AIL also founded the Gawhar Shad University in 2003 in response to the lack of higher educational opportunities for Afghan women. This university specializes in public health, thus allowing its graduates to provide urgent health care to marginalized women and in doing so sustainably improve their communities.

Through its wide variety of community based programs, AIL is helping forge a new Afghanistan in which women are given the respect and resources they need to become major actors of social change. In a recent interview Sakena Yacoobi explained AIL’s importance in Afghanistan:

*“I believe strongly in education -- that is the key. If you want women to have an active role in the society and to effect change, you need to educate women. If you give women access to education, human rights workshops, teacher training courses, they will ask questions, think and reason. Education helps women to understand their rights and to have confidence that they can make a difference. The women of Afghanistan are smart. They just have not had a chance to learn. Four million of the 11 million that voted were women. But if you do not have educated women you will not have democracy in Afghanistan.”*

### How Can You Help?

Help support Spark in its efforts to raise funds for the Afghan Institute of Learning by attending Spark’s Speakers Series on May 17<sup>th</sup> from 6-9pm at Hotel Vitale. Please visit [www.sparksf.org](http://www.sparksf.org) for more information.

Contact your representative to support the Afghan Women Empowerment Act of 2007 (S. 147) to allocate much need resources to bolster women’s empowerment in Afghanistan. Please visit [www.sparksf.org](http://www.sparksf.org) for more information.

# GIRLS' EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

- Girls' Education Under the Taliban (1996-2001):
  - Under the Taliban, girls were denied the right to attend school
  - The Taliban edict on girls' education led to a 65% drop in their enrolment
  
- Post-Taliban Girls Education
  - Within two years of the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban officials boasted that 5.1 million children of both sexes were enrolled in public schools.
  - This positive tide has come to a halt in several provinces where Taliban insurgents are aggressively battling NATO and U.S. troops, and has slowed dramatically in many other parts of the country. President Hamid Karzai told audiences in New York this week that about 200,000 Afghan children had been forced out of school this year by threats and physical attacks. (Washington Post Foreign Service Saturday, September 23, 2006)
  
- Attacks on Education:
  - Girls' school attendance has been impacted by threatening "night letters," distributed in mosques, around schools, and on routes taken by students and teachers, warning them against attending school and making credible threats of violence.
  - Human Rights Watch documented 204 incidents of attacks on teachers, students and schools in Afghanistan from January 2005-July 2006.
  - According to UNICEF, the attacks included 1 missile attack, 11 explosions, 50 burnings and 37 threats. In the four southern provinces under serious assault by Taliban forces, UNICEF said, nearly half of the 748 schools have stopped operating.
  
- Current Education Statistics:
  - Overall, girls make up 35% of the school enrollments in Afghanistan.
  - In the former Taliban strongholds of South Afghanistan girls enrollment is at its lowest, with only 3% in Zabul, 5% in Helmand and 7% in Khost.
  - Girls attending secondary school: Of girls attending primary school, only 9% continue to secondary school.
  - According to the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), currently, 40,000 students go to university; about 10,000 of those are women.
  - In Afghanistan, 36% of the total population is literate, 51% of the male and 21% of the female populations.
  
- Female Development Indicators:
  - 57% of girls are married before the legal age of 16.
  - Life expectancy for a woman in Afghanistan is 43 years.
  - Women's reproductive health awareness: 72% of married women under age 50 are unaware of any methods to delay pregnancy.
  - Only 14% of all births are attended by skilled health staff in Afghanistan.